

**Learning Document Series**

**16-18**

**Sharing development practices to create space for  
critical learning and discussion**

December 2015





# *Learning Document Series* *16-18*

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to create space for critical learning  
and discussion

December 2015



Programme Quality and Impact (PQI)  
ActionAid Bangladesh

## *Learning Document Series 16-18*

December 2015

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Tariqul Islam, PhD

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# Prologue

Learning document series depicts the trajectory of people's action in claiming rights, earning dignity and developing rights based credible alternative with support from solidarity organisation, people agencies and development organisation like ActionAid. 'Learning Document Series 16-18' is the sixth volume of its kind that ActionAid Bangladesh has been producing since 2009. It is to capture and share the learning on rights-based alternatives and development practices facilitated by ActionAid and its partners for wider upscale and replication.

This series presents learning on three development initiatives: Organic Advocacy, Resilience in Char (lands surrounded by river water and detached from the main land) and Women's Collectives in empowering grassroots women. Organicity of a Grassroots advocacy initiative is the essence of the first learning document in this publication. In Patharghata of Barguna district, people's agencies collectively demanded for 'embankment' finally succeeding in drawing attention of the high level officials in ministries and administrations. The way people at grassroots led this initiative has been analysed here to get their experiential learning. The second learning document shed light on whether ensuring public services and market access can promote the life and livelihood of people living in poverty in remote char areas. It captured the learning from the process of empowering people to get access to public services through a Union sub-center and a marketplace in Char North Channel of Faridpur district. The third document attempts to encapsulate the significant contribution of Women's Collectives (consisting of 1264 women in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat districts) in increasing women's mobility, social networking, and access to men dominated market structure. It has also documented the process of changing perceptions and practices in regards to women's contribution to economic activities through recognition and redistribution of unpaid care work in communities.

These three learning documents were developed applying qualitative research methods to capture grassroots knowledge, experiences and processes around the development of alternatives.

I must acknowledge the efforts of ActionAid Bangladesh and its valued partners for collectively facilitating the development alternatives in solidarity with the people living in poverty. Last but not the least, I must express gratitude to the grassroots people without whose efforts these development initiatives would not have been possible to thrive and succeed.

I trust you will enjoy reading these grassroots experiences.

**Tariqul Islam, PhD**

Director - Program Quality and Impact (PQI)

ActionAid Bangladesh



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Learning Document 16

# Organic Advocacy: Grassroots in the Lead

*ASM Juel Miah, Zinat Hasiba and Shaikh Ashraf Ali*  
*Translated by Rubayat Ahsan*



*Embankment of the river Baleshwar, Ruhita, Patharghata*



Photograph by Zinat Hasiba

*People living in poverty can individually and collectively bring an end to poverty and injustice. ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) has been working with this belief for more than 30 years in the rural and disadvantaged areas of Bangladesh. AAB's theory of change is that local communities can provide rights-based solutions to problems through active people's agencies<sup>1</sup> and their collective actions. Solidarity, campaigning and credible rights-based alternatives could help eliminate the root causes of poverty from our society. Hence, AAB's programs aim to raise awareness of community people, develop grassroots leadership and promote collective initiatives.*

*AAB has been implementing Local Rights Programmes (LRPs) in partnership with Shushilan, a local NGO at Patharghata, Borguna, since 2010. In this area, tidal surges regularly submerge coastal communities and destroy livelihoods. In the face of an increasing number of cyclones and climate change, communities urgently need strong and durable embankments. In Patharghata, people's agencies collectively demanded for 'embankment,' and finally succeeded in drawing the attention of the Ministries and Government Administration.*

*Organic advocacy led by grassroots is the essence of this learning document where qualitative method is applied for the collection and analysis of information. In Patharghata, we have conducted focus group discussions with 'Sundarban' women and 'Lalsobuj' men groups as well as the local business associations of Padma and Ruhita villages. Local grassroots leaders were also interviewed; local government officials and people's representatives, such as the chairman and members of Union Parishad, vice-chairman of Patharghata Upazilla Parishad and Deputy Commissioner (Executive head of the district) of Borguna, provided their opinions regarding this advocacy.*

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<sup>1</sup> People living in poverty playing the central role in bringing an end to poverty where their empowerment, action and organisation is fundamental

## Background

People in Patharghata have been demanding for a strong and durable embankment for many years. This is due to the fact that their villages become submerged by tidal surges in every monsoon. The existing embankment in this area was built during the 1960s. Parts of the embankment were collapsed by the cyclone Sidr in 2007, killing 76 people. This embankment was later repaired but was again washed away by the tidal surges of the Bolleshwar River. Water rushed into local communities, and swept away crops and livestock, as well as humans, causing a disruption in the daily life of the coastal communities.

In August 2014, heavy tidal surges and storms caused the embankment to collapse again. The river of Bolleshwar flooded the Padma, Ruhita, Badurtola and Korzalia villages of Patharghata Upazilla. A 70 feet section of the embankment near a cyclone shelter of the Padma village was completely destroyed, while another 680 feet was partially damaged. This caused flood water to enter the village, affecting around 350 families. Flood water entered the houses of around 200 families, 150 of whom had anywhere from 3 to 30 inches of water inside the house. The ground around these huts eroded. Latrines were damaged, and a shortage of drinking water ensued. Seedbeds and crops worth Tk. 4, 50,000 were destroyed by the flood. The flood waters washed away fish from around 100 water bodies.

As Hasenur, a member of Sundarban women's circle, recalls, *"Our rooms are flooded. Most of the time, we had to remain on the bed. We could not even cook due to the flood waters."* Another member, Renu, said, *"Those, who have money, move to the Patharghata municipality area, and the others, who don't have money and their houses were destroyed, had to go to Dhaka or Chittagong in search of work."*

Nearly 1.5 kilometers of the embankment from the Padma to the Ruhita village had been damaged long before the Sidr cyclone. A part of this had been repaired but due to the poor construction it was completely destroyed during Sidr. Time and again this embankment was repaired partially and damaged or destroyed either by flood or by cyclone. As a result, the people, the agriculture and the water sources of the Ruhita, Tafalbaria and Gabbaria villages were under a severe threat of more similar disasters.

In such circumstance, Sundarban women's circle in Ruhita village along with circles in Padma village mobilised people from the communities across the villages to take the issue to the local government administration and to lobby for it.

## Organicity of the advocacy

'Advocacy' is a widely adopted practice in the field of development and human rights. It is used to influence government laws and policies, and to make the implementation process more people-friendly. Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in advocacy through networks, forums, and civil society actors. Sometimes, grassroots communities unite to demand their rights or protest against injustice with the support of NGOs. However, a debate persists as to whether grassroots leaders can truly lead such a

16 movement or not. In many cases, the people who are most vulnerable do not get the opportunity to lead such advocacy activities. Often their involvement in the core advocacy work is limited. In the development field, advocacy initiatives are usually facilitated and coordinated by NGOs and civil society organisations. Grassroots communities participate in such processes, but they have rarely been observed to directly lead such advocacy initiatives. 'People's movement for durable embankment at Patharghata', is one such community led advocacy initiatives. It was led by the marginalised people of the community. They organized a human chain, demonstrated a protest rally, and submitted memorandum for a strong embankment in order to protect the lives and resources of the Padma and Ruhita villages. Shushilan, the local NGO, provided advisory support throughout the process. However, the difference is that the community people organised rally by themselves. Thousands of villagers joined the rally at their own cost and interest. Shushilan and AAB helped gain solidarity support by connecting them with the civil society actors and media. However, the credit for such a successful movement goes solely to the leaders and members of these circles for which it is worth calling 'Organic Advocacy'.

## The way it started

The advocacy initiative for embankment taken by the people in Patharghata is an exception. It sparked from smaller groups, fueled by the confidence they have gained from community level movements on women's rights issues and later took shape of a bigger movement. Timely support from ActionAid and Shushilan helped them to articulate their demand and connect with networks and officials. Since 2010 AAB has been working in this area to raise awareness and increase the problem-solving capacity of vulnerable and excluded men and women through Human Rights Based Approach<sup>2</sup>. Around 40 Reflection-Action circles (groups of vulnerable and excluded men and women) were formed in Patharghata Sadar and Charduani Union. These circles started with analysis of smaller problems and identification of the solutions, and gradually they began to deal with wider socio-political issues. In the circles they come up with a plan of action to solve the issues that they identify at community level and eventually connect the issues beyond the village and Union Parishad (UP) level; sometimes they link them with Upazila and District level issues or movements. The circle leaders play vital role in such movements. In Patharghata, members of the circles participated in the movement for stronger embankment. They played the key role in the negotiation process with the local administration for achieving this success. Such advocacy initiative, taken by the community leaders, was able to draw the attention of high level authorities as well as the relevant Ministries. Members of the circles were able to influence local civil society actors, the government officials, NGOs and media, to support the proposed changes.

<sup>2</sup> ActionAid's Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) centres on supporting people living in poverty to become conscious of their rights, to organise themselves to claim their rights, and to hold duty bearers to account. We build on international human rights law, but go beyond a legal or technical approach, supporting people to analyse and confront power imbalances and taking sides with people living in poverty.

The movement for embankment was in fact initiated from Uthan Boithok<sup>3</sup> in the communities. Having confidence from the skill and knowledge acquired through reflection-action circles, members of the communities were inspired for organising such courtyard meeting. These circles are functioning in four villages of Patharghata union and in four villages of Charduani union since 2011. Awareness raising had been carried out among the members of these circles through a range of rights analysis, problem identification, planning, implementation of plan, review and reflection of work. Through this process, they gained understanding about the violation of rights and its consequences in their life as well as in the communities. This understanding on violation of rights led them to take individual and collective initiatives for claiming their rights in order to solve their problems. This sense of collectivism brought the grassroots people together in Patharghata and it had shaped the embankment movement.

## Inspiring experiences of the grassroots

Confidence of the grassroots leaders for initiating a movement came from the experiential learning. Dealing with small scale campaigns, village or union level movements, local level advocacy initiatives and the lessons from the successes and failures contributed in this process.

In the case of Patharghata, it started with an incident of violence against an eight year old girl. A boy from the neighboring village of Ruhita kidnapped and raped

"A lot of problems arose once the embankment collapsed. First the circles had a discussion. We visited them, and invited other circles as well as eminent people to a meeting at the primary school. There, we decided to organize a human chain. There were around 25 to 30 participants in the meeting. We formed a committee of 15 people, composed of both circle members and other eminent villagers -- Rahiman, Masuma, Honufa, Mazeda, Kohinur, Komola, Khadiza, Zakir, Altaf, Alam, Panna Mia, Mannan, Rofikul, Habib, Babul Munsu and me. Only Rahima, Habib, Rafikul and I were from the circle. We decided that everybody would circulate the decision of the human chain to 25 people, each of whom would pass it on to 25 more people. We also decided that everyone would bear the expense of their own transport to join this event. Those who didn't have money went there on foot. We knew that only government could solve the 'embankment' problem and thus, we decided to communicate with such government departments and officials. The Shushilan personnel helped us write these documents. Honufa, Khadiza, Rofikul, and Habib had worked hard for this event. We were in the front line during announcement and demonstration of the human chain. Though there were fewer women participants in the first human chain, nobody stayed at home during the second one."

*-Pakhi Begum, Chairperson, Sundarban women's circle*

<sup>3</sup> Uthan Boithok is a popularly used Bengali word at NGOs and also at grassroots programs. It's an informal discussion that usually takes place at a village hut premise; members of one or a number of families may gather in such village hut premises for discussion. The topic of the discussion may vary starting from social awareness issues to economic and even political empowerment aspects.

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the daughter of one of the members of the Sundarban circle. The circle members met some of the witnesses. The members became aware by the discussion on violence against women issues in the circle and that inspired them to take actions in this case. Initially the members of the circle did not have confidence or the courage to contact police. Later they discussed with the ward member of Union Council along with some of the villagers. But the member did not take any action; instead he gave them 50 taka for taking the survivor to the hospital. The members of the circle then contacted the facilitator of the Sundarban circle and requested for support from Shushilan office. At the beginning the villagers were reluctant to talk about the incident but the circle members took the girl to the police station and filed a case. The girl was then admitted to a hospital. Although a case was filed, police did not take initiative to arrest the perpetrator. The circle members suspected that police might have been bribed for not taking any action. The members explored alternative strategies for drawing the attention from the authorities. They came up with the idea of organising a human chain.

Pakhi Begum, the chair of Sundarban circle, said, *“Our circle facilitator suggested organising a human chain, so we discussed it with members of all circles members including boys, girls, men and women in the community. We set the date and time, and finally organised the human chain. Around 250 to 300 men, women, boys and girls, from Ruhita village joined this human chain. Members of SVAW committee and staff of Shushilan helped us with writing and documentation. The husband of the secretary of our circle helped police to locate the perpetrator, arrest him at Mohipur. This criminal is now in prison.”*

Saiful, a boatman from Padma village and a member of Lalsobuj men's circle, says, *“We, around 600 people, gathered around the police station. The OC (Officer in Charge) promised and instructed the SI (Sub-Inspector) to arrest the accused by next 3 days. Later police arrested the criminal from an engine boat. This made us realize the effectiveness of a human chain.”*

Successes from these rights claiming collective initiatives and events at the union and upazila level have increased the confidence of grassroots leadership. Such grassroots motivation for demanding public services created a momentum to organise the sustainable embankment movement at Patharghata. The embankment issue was so pressing for the Padma and Ruhita villagers that they orchestrated much bigger movements centering on this.

## Involvement of individuals and people's agencies

Members of the Padma and Ruhita circles mainly worked on uniting the villagers. The women played the lead role for this advocacy. The Sundarban circle of the Padma village first raised their voice for a stronger and durable embankment and later, successfully motivated other circles in the area, as well as, villagers. The women leaders of these circles played significant role from their families to the community levels. Initially women were to communicate with officials in local administration but after having discussion among the members of different circles they were confident to discuss it directly with the officials.

Anwara, a member of Sundarban women circle, says, *“We had huge losses due to the collapse of the embankment. So we came together to discuss our problems and after forming a committee, we submitted a memorandum to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (Sub-district Executive Officer) with our message: “We don’t want relief; we just want a strong embankment.”*

Members of the circles, along with the locals, arranged several meetings at field level, distributed roles and responsibilities among members, organised human chains involving all the villagers. Kholilur Rahman, a villager, noted, *“In the month of August, 2014, we organised people in the cyclone shelter and made an announcement about the human chain. We formed different committees of 25 people in each and together marched towards Patharghata. We took the parade to the chairman of Charduani. The chairman also joined the procession after having seen many people in it.”*

Most of the participants of this movement were farmers and the member of fisher folk community. The NGO personnel helped them to write the memorandum and to communicate with journalists, and civil society actors. They visited the damaged embankment site in Padma village and conducted a survey among the victims in order to submit a report on the loss and damage in the Upazila Parishad area. Shushilan also helped them in inviting newspaper and TV journalists to the area for collecting information. A copy of the memorandum was submitted to the executive engineer of the Water Development Board in Borguna. On 17th July, 2014, news on the movement was published in four national daily newspapers (The Daily Jugantor, Prothom Alo, Ittefaq and Bortoman). Following these news reports, the Upazila Nirbahi Officer and the Upazilla Parishad chairman, along with officials from the Water Development Board and Upazila Project Implementation Committee, visited the affected area.

## **Protest and procession – experiencing and building confidence**

Members of the Padma and Ruhita circles have spent the four years (2011-2014) in protesting on different issues of their concern. They began with analysing women’s rights and discussing women’s empowerment. This led to their first protest during the ‘violence against Sharmin’ case. The human chain in this case helped to gain confidence among the people and formed the hope that collective call for justice would be heard. They began to raise their voice against violation of women's rights in their communities and gradually started addressing other problems in a greater scale at Union or Upazila level. Some of these include cases of violence against women and girls, the abduction of and abuse on fishermen by pirates, and the construction of an embankment.

Rahima, a member of the Sundarban women’s circle, says, *“In order to protest against pirates, some of us went on our own expenses while some went on foot. Most of these were women, as their sons and husbands were victims of pirate attacks just like us. We were invited by other circles to join this protest unlike the embankment case where we invited other circles. Thousands of people joined our*

## Stages of the movement at Patharghata

Issue	Context	Time/date	Initiatives of circles and villagers	Associations
Installation of strong and sustainable embankment	Embankment close to Padma and Ruhita village collapsed due to excessive tidal forces and water pressures. 800 houses were submerged in water and crops of around 150 acres land had been damaged.	First human chain on 16 July, 2014  Second human chain on 10 December, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussion at circles about human chain for embankment</li> <li>- Formation of committees and distribution of responsibilities</li> <li>- Communicating with villagers, NGO personnel, government officials and journalists</li> <li>- Communicating with all members of Padma and Ruhita villages</li> <li>- Setting date for human chain</li> <li>- Announcement of the event across villages</li> <li>- Signature campaign for collecting consent from the people in order to submit memorandum to the Prime Minister</li> <li>- Participation at the human chain and submission of the memorandum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Spot visit by upazilla chairman, parliamentarian, and union parishad chairman and members</li> <li>- Spot visit by journalists and broadcasting news through media</li> </ul>

*protest, I remember."*

The demand for embankment was very timely and it was of the interest for everyone living in the area. Most of the people were affected by the damaged embankment. The villagers, therefore, attended the protest spontaneously. Kamal Hossain, a villager, said, "We gathered in front of the UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) office. The UNO (top executive of Upazilla administration) came out of his office and promised to address the issue." Rafikul Islam (member, Gangchil men's circle) added, "At the procession, our only ask was a strong and durable embankment". Nanna Mia (member, Boyal fishermen's circle) at the Padma village said, "We have organised human chains in order to protest against pirates as well. Around 2000 people marched to the UNO's office with the demand. The UNO called the Member of Parliament (MP) over mobile phone who handed the phone over to the Minister of Water Resources. The phone was put on loudspeaker so that everyone could hear the conversation. The Minister promised to provide coast guard services in our area. We rejoiced at the news and at hearing the Minister himself assure us. Later, coastguard were deployed to protect fishermen from pirates."

## Grassroots representation at local government – shifting the power

Fatima Parveen, age 38, is currently the vice-chairman of Patharghata upazilla. Over the years, she has become a representative of the grassroots communities. She assisted the communities in demanding for their rights. She was the one who read out the memorandum to the Prime Minister during a video conference arranged at local government level.

In 1993, at the age of 16, Fatima became a victim of child marriage. She experienced violence and torture in her family life. Protesting against similar violence against women, eventually she became a women rights activist.

Fatima began working as the cultural secretary of the Stop Violence against Women (SVAW) committee at Upazilla level from April 2011 – an initiative of project on ‘Women in Action through Engagement and Resistance’ implemented by ActionAid Bangladesh and Shushilan. This opportunity of having a leadership greatly encouraged and empowered Fatima. She became well-known to the villagers for her dedication and involvement in protesting violence against women. She worked hard to stop child marriage and domestic violence, and helped the victims. She also began to work with other NGOs and civil society forums. According to Ismail Hossain, the manager of Shushilan, *“Fatima was initially reluctant to contact the higher level of local government institution and would request us to do so instead. Now she no longer hesitates to protest or bring up the community’s demands to higher level government officials and non-government agencies.”*

The SVAW Committee acknowledged Fatima’s leadership in the communities and wanted her to compete for the position of Upazila Parishad Chairman. Fatima expressed her interest and increased her efforts in public relation. She began to play vital roles in various tasks undertaken by the circles. She was also responsible for giving speech at the meetings and seminars, inspiring the people, supporting their demands, and the memorandum.

On 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2014, Fatima was elected

"I used to get harassed on the street and was forced into child marriage. My family lacked awareness and the society was so blind that the sun had set before the dusk arrived in my adolescence. I don't know how many times I had to run away in order to escape the torture at home. In 1996, I attempted suicide by consuming sedative drugs. I was admitted to the Patharghata hospital in bed no.9 where I writhed in agony for 3 days. It was there I found my will to live again and I decided to protest against the injustice and the abuse inflicted on me. I secretly began educating myself. I also learned sewing and tailoring. I started publishing writings in local newspapers in order to express my views. The situation along with my protests influenced my husband into correcting himself. However, this was only achieved after immense suffering and endless tears."

*-Fatima Parveen*

as the female Vice-Chairperson of the Upazila Parishad. The election inspired Fatima even more to work for women rights. Illusion of power did not make her proud or alienated her from community. She continued to participate in the programs and capacity development initiatives of the community. She was given the responsibility of talking to the Prime Minister on behalf of the community through video conference. She sat with the circle members and developed a 'memorandum' for placing the demand for a durable embankment to the Prime Minister. Finally, on 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 2014, Fatima, as a representative of Patharghata, spoke to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh where she explained the problems faced by the communities and their demands. On asking why they chose Fatima as Patharghata's representative for the video conference, the Upazila Chairman and District Commissioner mentioned about her courage and skill as a leader. Fatima is now an inspiration for the grassroots communities, especially the women. The success of Fatima, from being a leader from grassroots and her ability to take the grassroots issue to the head of the State was the source of power of the people living in poverty in shaping the embankment movement.

## Organic advocacy – the changes made so far

The change brought up through this organic advocacy is visible in two ways. One is directly related to the asks of the people. As Asaduzzaman, the Union Parishad Chairman of Patharghata, said, *"We heard that the allocation has been made but we doubt it would be enough to build a stronger embankment. The people's demands were not fulfilled. We need the MP's assistance in this matter."*

But later, the required allocation was made for the embankment. A budget of around 137 crore taka was allocated for building a 35.5 km long embankment. In addition, about two crore taka was allocated as contingency fund for repairing the embankment in future.

"There was another embankment down there which was destroyed during Sidr. This embankment is the result of our movement but this, too, has collapsed in various places."

*-Soleman, member, Lalsobuj circle*

Mir Zahurul Islam, Deputy Commissioner of Borguna, reflected, *"Patharghata embankment is now under strong consideration. It is under the jurisdiction of Water Development Board. The issue was discussed in the District Development Coordination Committee and we have drawn the attention of the Ministry of Water Resources' based on this discussion. The embankment is being constructed at Taltoli and Baliatoli. Land acquisition is taking place following government procedure and compensation has also been provided."*

The other change is reflected in the attitude the community people in collective action, especially women claiming their rights. According to Asaduzzaman, the Union Parishad Chairman of Patharghata, *"There is a huge difference between women of today and women of the past, particularly in this area. Four years ago the women would never have come here to protest."* This change was visible when thousands of men and women came together for the 'durable

embankment' movement and the women came forward to bargain with the local government administration. The movement has brought changes to both individual and collective spheres. Fatima Parveen was not the only one. Others such as Pakhi Begum, Rofikul, Habibur, Honufa, Morzina and Rina were also active grassroots representatives. The ability to solve their own problems by working in team and taking up leadership have helped them to overcome their reluctance and made them courageous. They are not only confined to participation in the movements either. They can take initiative, communicate with other circles, unite villagers, and bargain with the local government administration.

## Challenges faced during the movement

The embankment movement has overcome the following challenges-

- **People's lack of confidence:** Embankment erosion was happening every year and people were accustomed to the inconveniences caused by it. Therefore, when some of the rights-conscious community leaders proposed a large scale movement, many community members were not at all confident about its success and were initially unwilling to participate. However, after several discussions, the circle members were able to convince the villagers for collectively claiming their rights and about the potential success.
- **Fear around partisan politics:** Due to political unrest around partisan politics, the elected people's were worried about huge gatherings and initially refused to support to the embankment movement. But in the heat of the popular uprising, the representatives could not help but join the movement.
- **Disruption by natural calamity:** The embankment collapsed due to heavy rain and tidal surges which damaged houses and roads, and affected the agriculture. As a result, many people in the community were busy protecting their assets. Travelling a distance of 3-5 kilometers in order to reach the sub-district for demonstrations became a challenge, especially because of muddy roads. However, with no other viable alternative within reach, the communities did work, despite the calamity, for a collective movement towards a sustainable solution of embankment erosion.

## Walking ahead

In practice usually the grassroots can reach up to a certain limit, like raising their voice through human chain. The human chain has been in operation here at Patharghata. However, the communities are aware that they cannot limit themselves to human chains if they wish to bring about the expected changes. They have to maintain sound communication with the local government administration in order to achieve collective result and bring about sustainable solutions. Many windows of communication are now opening up. The Prime Minister is conducting video conferences in every district. The cell phone numbers of

16 local government officials have become much easier to collect. These can be used to gather information. Grassroots communities can now draw attention of the Ministries and policy makers at the national level using these facilities in their communication for claiming their rights.

The Union Parishad Chairman, Asaduzzaman has insisted on more campaigns and advocacy for solving problems like pirates and embankments. According to Mir Zahurul Islam, District Commissioner, Borguna, the local government administration puts emphasis on women's education and pays close attention to cases on violence against women. In his opinion, education and awareness in the society could empower women to make their own decisions. He also recommended that the grassroots communities can adapt new information and communication technologies in order to contact respective offices for updating information on the progress.



People from village Ruhita and Padma claiming strong embankment right after the disaster

Grassroots circles are now pushing for regular communication with the administration. This is a strategic priority for taking new initiatives in their area.

- *ASM Juel Miah and Zinat Hasiba* are working in the Research, Innovation and Knowledge team and *Shaikh Ashraf Ali* is working in the Local Rights Program Operation team of ActionAid Bangladesh

Learning Document 17

# Towards Resilience: People's Alternative in Char

*Zinat Hasiba*

*Char of North Channel union, Faridpur.*



Photograph by Zinat Hasiba

Full of potentials, river islands in Bangladesh are still considered 'remote areas' deprived of basic opportunities. North Channel Union, rich in natural resources, is one of those hard to reach River Islands, located in the Faridpur district of Bangladesh. A long journey by boat from the mainland is a must to reach this island. People of this char<sup>4</sup> mostly live off crop-based agriculture. However, most of the people do not have their own land. They cultivate crops on shared land. Irregular flooding has increased the vulnerability of the agriculture system. For example, seasonal flood is supposed to take place from May to June. Now-a-days, either early floods take place in March or late floods take place between August and September. Access to market is another major concern here, without which farmers cannot get a fair price for what they produce. It also limits the options for alternative livelihoods. Improving their situation requires services from local government, such as public services on agriculture, livestock, and poultry for char people. Other basic public service provisions, especially health clinic, school, and electricity are scarce in this char. As a result, people need to spend a lot of money in purchasing services from private initiatives such as education from private schools, medicines from private pharmacies, solar energy for electricity, etc. The services provided through private services providers are only affordable for the local elites.

ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB), in partnership with Amra Kaj Kori (AKK), a local NGO, worked in this union for a decade. Reflect<sup>5</sup> and self-help<sup>6</sup> group approaches were applied in empowering the people living in poverty. Community people were empowered to claim their rights and to place their demand for financing from government. External funds (the project, in this case) were used to capacitate the local government in participatory planning, budgeting and implementation. The skills of local elected bodies have also been enhanced in utilising external fund to address people's demand presented in participatory budget. People's access to public services at North Channel had been primer for which a Union Parishad<sup>7</sup> (UP) sub-centre had been set up. Protecting the market adjacent to the union sub-centre from flood has brought huge economic implications for the community to sell their agricultural products. Along with these initiatives, a 'model village' had been set up in this Union through advocacy with local government. These initiatives were advocated by the community people in the participatory budget sessions of the Union Parishad.

In a nutshell, all these initiatives mentioned above were aimed towards resilience<sup>8</sup> building as a form of adaptation mechanism. The initiatives enhanced the capacity of the community people and enriched their knowledge and practices in resilience building. As a result, the people in this char have increased capacity to deal with Union Parishad and other social issues affecting their life.

This learning document sheds light on how to ensure that public services and market access can promote the life and livelihoods of people living in poverty in char areas and strengthening resilience against the changing pattern of the flood. A field study was conducted to capture the learning of the process. The study was conducted in 2014. Focus group discussion and in-depth interview methods were applied in data collection process.

<sup>4</sup> Island that floats within rivers

<sup>5</sup> A group of community people dealing with the challenges the community faces for bringing social change through an innovative approach of adult literacy. Log on to <http://www.reflect-action.org/> to learn more about Reflect

<sup>6</sup> Group of marginalized people helping themselves improve quality of their lives through Income Generating Activities (IGAs) and entrepreneurship. These groups focus on economic empowerment besides building awareness about political empowerment of women and of their rights.

<sup>7</sup> Lowest tier of local government

<sup>8</sup> Resilience is generally defined as, "the capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazards to adapt, by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure. This is determined by the degree to which the social system is capable of organising itself to increase this capacity for learning from past disasters for better future protection and to improve risk reduction measures." - [http://www.unisdr.org/files/7817\\_UNISDRterminologyEnglish.pdf](http://www.unisdr.org/files/7817_UNISDRterminologyEnglish.pdf) pg. 4

## Background

Being located in remote areas (from the perspective of central urban set up) and deprived of the basic services, infrastructure and transport facilities, char areas have always been a geographic priority for development organisations. ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) started its long-term program in North Channel Union of Faridpur Shadar Upazila in 2003 to promote rights of the people living in poverty. Later, short-term projects were implemented to combat the risks associated to local climate-induced disasters. Using Human Rights Based Approach to climate change adaptation, the programme intended to identify the process of 'participatory local adaptation mechanism' for the communities. Building the capacity of Union Parishad on participatory plans and budget, and incorporating communities' voice in the plan was a major component of the project. This would increase the accountability of the UP and its fund management capacity. The learning from this initiative can be used in other char areas in building resilience of the vulnerable people. There are many context specific challenges and learning, this document is an effort of having a critical analysis of them.

## Overall situation of char North Channel

The North Channel is a flood prone isolated area from the mainland and the only two kilometers of proper road that can be used for transportation gets flooded during rainy season. According to the community people, three types of hazards exist in the North Channel: floods, droughts, and river erosion. Modes of transportation are restricted to horse carts and boats. In dry season, riding a horse becomes the main mode of transportation. People often face difficulties in getting transports both in terms of availability and money. There are no passenger shelters, latrines or safe water facilities available on the boat docks (nouka ghat). Local transports are always overloaded and less cautious of their capacity. The few sanitary latrines are not accessible for the persons with disabilities. There are no stairs or ramps for pregnant women or people with disabilities to get on the boat. No safety measures are taken (*life jacket, lights, etc.*) while travelling on the boat, which increases the risk for passengers. Only local elite can afford solar panels, and no other sources of electricity are available in the char land. Domestic violence is a common incidence for women and the district Stop Violence against Women (SVAW) committee is not reachable due to the lack of connectivity. Women are even more vulnerable during and after natural disaster. They face difficulties regarding accommodation, privacy, latrines, etc. in the shelter during disaster period.

People of this char mostly survive on crop-based agriculture, although they do not own the land. Irregular flooding is increasing the vulnerability of the local agricultural system. For example, seasonal flood is supposed to take place from May to June but now-a-days, either early flood takes place in March or late flood takes place between August and September. According to the community, the changing flood pattern prevents them from planning their crops cultivation in advance. Because most farmers do not own the land they cultivate, access to land is based on leasing and sharecropping system. In case of leasing the arrangement is,

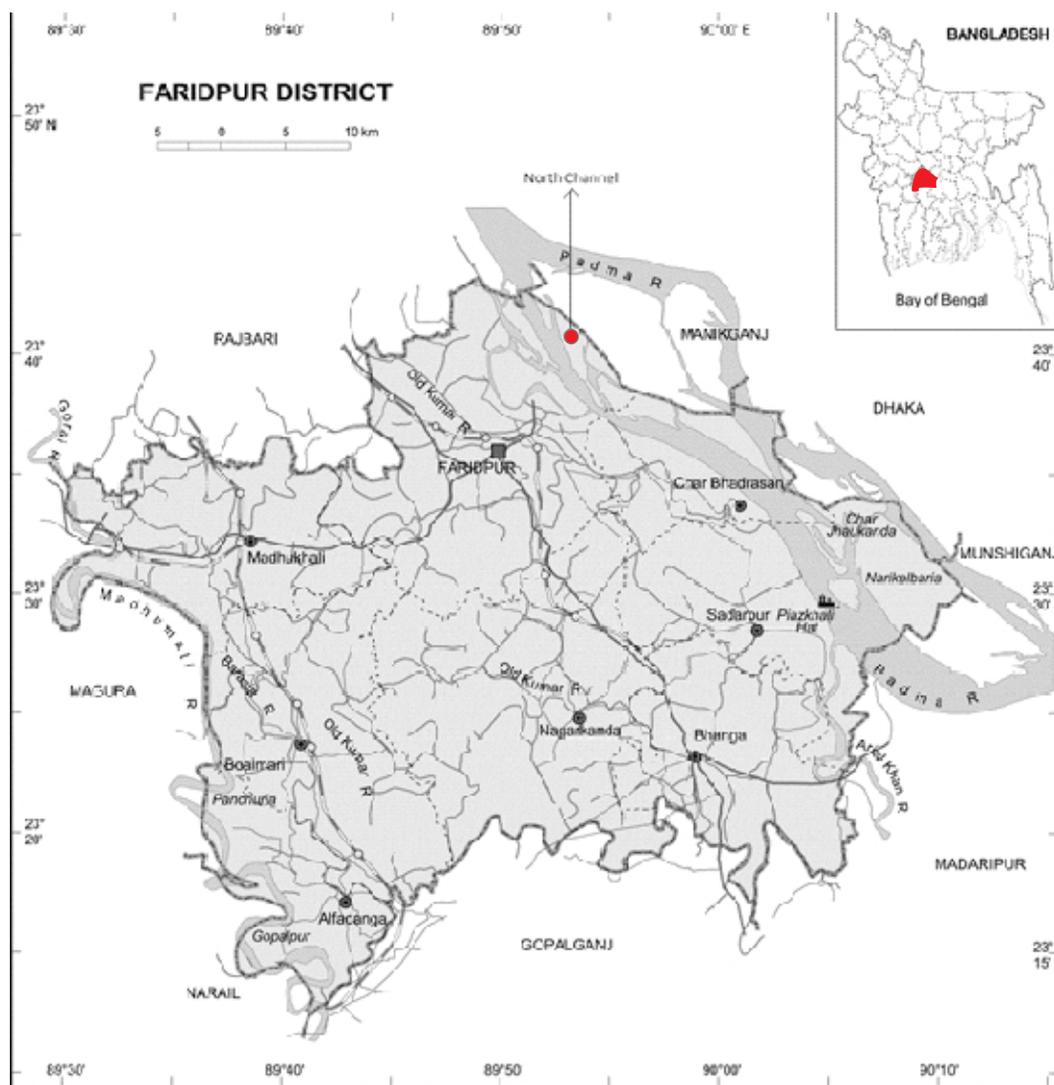


Figure: Map of Faridpur District Indicating North Channel Union

they need to pay BDT 2000 per year per bigha<sup>9</sup> of land. The arrangement varies as per the crop they cultivate. For example, rice farmers get 75% of the harvest, and 'Kalai' (lentils) and 'nut' farmers get only half of the harvest. Mostly single crops are cultivated in a year, but recently double and triple cultivation has been taking place, using local land use adaptation plan. Land use adaptation plans mainly focus on increasing the use of land, based on a seasonal calendar which considers the changing pattern of hazard. Production within the char contributes directly to the availability and accessibility of food in the North Channel. According to the local traders, approximately 75% of the rice, 100% of the mustard oil, and

<sup>9</sup> 33 decimals= 1 bigha of land

50% of the vegetable consumed in the char are produced locally. Nearly all of the *kalai* produced in the char are sold to mainland consumers, and only 1% is consumed in char. Mango, guava and plum are produced in the char, and sold to the pickle producers coming from mainland. Spices like turmeric, cumin seed, and coriander seed produced are enough to meet local demand, but producers sell them to the buyers from mainland since processing system is absent within the char. Consumption of the spices, thus, is dependent on the market. Overall, there is huge potential in terms of a self-sufficient local food economy in this char.

Livelihood options other than crop cultivation are not popular yet. Fishing, poultry rearing, cattle rearing, homestead gardening are also widely practiced. Cattle-rearing is more or less common in the households. As part of small scale mitigation initiative against floods, some of the community people have raised plinth of their homestead and having kitchen gardens in that piece of land for getting vegetable round the year for their household consumption. The homesteads are, so far, flood resistant considering last flood level in 2007 but not meant to resist wind storm. People's income decrease by half during the rainy season, but they do not starve from it. Higher platform of homestead that serves kitchen gardening during flood, practice of dry food preservation, fishing in the river, and recently set up marketplace help char dwellers to survive during disaster.

In the char area, there is no community health clinic or hospital. Child marriage and child pregnancy is prevalent here. The number of Family Welfare Clinics (FWC) is inadequate, and people from remote area do not usually visit these clinics. People are unaware of safe delivery methods. Delivery kits are not properly used for child births taking place at home. Most of the deliveries happen at home, facilitated by female kin or untrained 'dai' (birth attendant) as there only a few skilled birth attendants in the char. There is no doctor, trained paramedic, and nurse close to the community. Only a small number of Community Health Workers (Family Welfare Visitor & *Shastho Sebika*) are available. Family planning services are insufficient in terms of variety of birth control methods. Char dwellers are familiar with contraceptives, but the use of condoms is an unpopular method.

In many cases, families living in poverty consider their daughter as a burden and get them married off as early as possible. However, girls are more often enrolled in primary school than boys because the boys can get employed at an early age to earn money for their family. Girls are withdrawn from school by their parents, and married off. Dowry is also linked to child marriage since girls' parents can reduce amount they must as dowry if they marry off their daughters at an early age. Both government and non-government schools are available, but enrolment rate is very low in government schools. One of the reasons could be the lack of quality education and teachers. Teachers are from the mainland and always late by the time constraint caused by the availability of trawlers (12pm-2:30pm is the time they get to teach including lunch hour). As a result, proxy teaching is commonly practised here. Parents have complained against the proxy teachers, who allegedly employ corporal punishment on the

children. However, the plinths of schools are high enough, so it does not submerged by water in the rainy season. But transport during the rainy season is not sufficiently available for the students. Children coming from comparatively well off families can attend school with their own boat, and they sometimes help their neighbouring schoolmates coming to school. But there is no public transport in the char. An examination centre at the char for the Primary School Certificate (PSC) exam has been set up recently. It is a result of long struggle of grassroots leaders of the community circles lobbying with education offices at upazila and district education offices.

## Change agents in the community

A number of platforms are acting as people's agencies in this char. For instance, agencies such as farmers groups, association of persons with disabilities, federation, self-help groups, fishermen's platform, Gono Gobeshona Dal (people's research team) have been developed in the char. They have started working as agents of change in the community. Although all the groups do not have strong leadership, some of the grassroots leaders are very active.

*Self-help groups* led by women are active in terms of accelerating individual entrepreneurship. Access to finance is the focus of their activities. Providing access to finance with 10% interest rate (which is very low considering the rate offered by local micro-finance institutions), these groups are giving an opportunity to other women of the char. It has already helped a number of the group members to engage in entrepreneurship and improve their livelihood; but inclusion of women beyond the group is yet to be observed in terms of empowerment issues.

*Federation*, a people's organisation consisting of self-help groups, is working as a strong and common platform for people's economic and political empowerment. They have a clear spirit and vision about their activism. People other than the members of this platform also have access to this federation. In the long term, if the federation plans to incorporate other platforms like associations of farmers, persons with disabilities, and fishermen, this might show the community a well-coordinated and wider path towards development. Associations formed other than the Federation are motivated, but they still require clear vision. These community agents raised their issues at the participatory budget process organised by Union Parishad in 2011. Prior to the budget, they have analysed their problems and collected data on their needs and demands. With this they identified their key problems, and what they need from the local government as solutions. ActionAid Bangladesh along with AKK, ensured these community groups' participation in the UP plans and budget process to place their demands. The UP was financed through tripartite agreement<sup>10</sup> along with provision of some skill development training to the UP members. Through this process, community people have increased ability to place their demand to the local government, and local government enhanced their capacity to address people's demand.

<sup>10</sup> A tripartite agreement had been done among ActionAid Bangladesh, Amra Kaj Kori and North Channel Union Parishad

# Initiatives for changing the life and livelihoods of the people in Char

The main strategy in facilitating the whole process was to empower people to claim their rights, holding duty bearers accountable. Since climate adaptation was a major concern, community groups opted for the initiative for greening the char, risk reduction initiatives and strengthening livelihood options as well as access to institutions to avail different services.

**Social forestation:** Prioritising the greening of the char, an intervention of social forestation, was initiated and implemented by the self-help group with the support from local government. Self-help groups led by women members of the community earned the ownership of the trees and it became a source of income for them. The initiative was replicated in different parts of the char. Although the initiative was good but the challenge was in selecting the type of trees. The selection of the trees was done by government programmes and the government chose Acacia, an invasive tree, as one of the plants. As a result the whole area is becoming occupied by such type of tree, no other tree survived. However the learning did not stop the community in their greening spirit and quality of the initiative.

**Union sub-center:** Union sub-center is an extension of the main Union Parishad center in the char. It ensures better access of char dwellers to basic public services. Usually existing school building or shelter houses in the char are used by the Union Parishad to provide their basic services at regular intervals. In the North Channel, three problems lie with this alternative system. Firstly, it is a huge and geographically scattered union which could not be covered by temporary presence and limited resources. Secondly, not all the wards of the union have buildings that can be used by the Union Parishad and local government officials. Thirdly, ward no.1 is geographically detached from other parts of the union as well as from the mainland. There are no school or any other buildings for temporary use; hence it remained deprived of all the services from UP and other government offices such as agricultural office, livestock office etc. The establishment of this sub-center has provided local people to access public services for agriculture and health in particular. Information board with names, cell phone numbers and visit schedule of the officials are available in the sub-center. This helps the people in community reach the officials as they need. Officials visit the place as per the schedule and provide technical advice to the community people. However, there is still much scope of improvement in the system for providing services. According to the UP members, the allotment they get to distribute among the community people is not enough considering the population in this char. There is a huge potential of better utilisation of this center. This would require integrated planning and better coordination.

**A model village for informed advocacy:** The objective of establishing a model village was to set up an example of a climate resilient and livable char through advocacy initiatives. It was

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done in partnership with local government generating a critical understanding of how to rehabilitate extremely marginalised families while ensuring a minimum standard of living and access to required services. With this initiative, the local government has been introduced practical model to rehabilitate the marginalised families and to improve their socio-economic condition. This initiative involved the community by forming Gono Gobeshona Dal (people's research groups) to identify and prioritise families in need of such support for improving their life. Through assessment by the Gono Gobeshona Dal, 10 families were selected for this initiative. They were provided with ownership of a piece of land, home, drinking water supply, livestock, kitchen garden as well as capacity and awareness building trainings on life and livelihoods. These people, with the technical assistance of agriculture officer, initiated a collective effort of triple cropping by leasing a piece of land. Soon the idea became popular in the neighboring area. The success of this initiative transformed the mono-cropping system of the char agriculture to poly-cropping system.

**Round the year access to marketplace:** Due to unavailability of road connections, access to market for the people in this char was a big everyday challenge. During the rainy season the problem became worse as most of the land, including the marketplaces, would become submerged. Therefore, it was very important for the villagers to have a marketplace that will not be affected by the flood or heavy rainfall. The marketplace adjacent to the union sub-centre has thus been raised to make it flood resistant. The newly developed marketplace has created multiple effects serving different purposes in the villages. The height of the plinth was fixed considering previous records (1998, 2007 and 2008) of the water level during flood.

This market has around forty shops managed by a committee comprised of 30 entrepreneurs. The main objective of the committee, as the members mentioned, is to monitor the price for betterment of the customers and provide emergency financial support to the members from a common fund. Buyers from the mainland also are part of the market committee. People also use the place as shelter for themselves and for their cattle during floods. Commodities of the market mainly come from the mainland region of the Sadar Upazila. A temporary stock house has been built for the convenience of selling products of char to mainland. Especially, raw spices are sold to the buyers coming to the market from mainland. In many ways this market is fulfilling local demand for goods and trade.

## Findings and learning

The initiative was taken up in the North Channel Union for improving the life of the people living in Char through increased access to market and creating better livelihood options in the face of climate change. The project has gathered some learning which need to be considered in such intervention in the future.

- Establishing a union sub-centre (for better public services) adjacent to the marketplace

and raising the plinth of that place (for better market access) complemented each other in having better impact. People coming to the marketplace can now get information about the UP services. For example, whenever there is health camp or vaccination campaign organised at the UP sub-centre, the news is announced at the marketplace to circulate the information in the community. In addition, women's access to the market (both as customer and seller) has made the UP and its services familiar to women. This bridges the gap between the community and local government bodies.

“There was a marketplace named ‘Mohon Miah Haat’ here. Every year it used to be flooded with water. The marketplace used to become nearly non-functional back then. Every year, owners of the shops had to spend two to three thousand taka to protect the shop from water. In 2012, the plinth of that haat had been raised now we call it ‘Mohon Miah notun haat’. Now we are free from the hassle and extra expenses as haat does not get flooded. But now we are being charged toll on our sale by local affluent. From the market committee we tried to settle with a lump sum amount. But we could not manage them. Every week they draw 1.5 taka per package (basta) from the shop keepers and 5 taka per 100 taka sale from temporary sellers. However we are still doing great. There was no shop owned by women in the old haat, last year this number was three and there are 6 shops owned and run by women now. And they are in the market committee as well.”

- Amzad Shikdar, Grocer

- Establishment of the union sub-centre enabled the inhabitants of ward no. 1 and 2 to get access to the public services. They now have access to government services related to agriculture (training, technical advice, farmer's identity card), livestock (training, interest free loan, vaccination camps), health (weekly visit of doctor), family planning, and of course the UP services (necessary documents such as birth certificate, nationality certificate, signature for passports, etc.). The sub-centre in fact is now connecting the mainland and the char for public services.
- Family planning services are now easily accessible. Usually women receive these services as the provision of such services targets women. They are receiving contraceptives and consultation support from woman service provider. The Men are not yet covered by these services.
- Men usually access the services related to agriculture, which are now being accessed by women as well. In fact women farmers are now taking technical assistance from the respective government officials. Monowara Begum, Sarda, Maleka Begum, Laili Begum - a number of women have increased agricultural production and are getting good return of their investment.
- Women's access to institutions both in char and mainland has increased only among the group members. It increases mobility of women. They are accessing different institutes like department of Livestock, Department of Land, Masala Research

Institute, Union Parishad, Deputy Commissioner's (Executive head of the district administration) Office, public hospitals, Agriculture Research Institute etc. to receive public services. Women who do not belong to any of the groups are yet to have that level of mobility.

- Better access to basic government services led to an increase in utilisation of land, as well as regular consultation with sub-assistant agricultural extension officer. The Gono Gabeshona Dal initiated triple cropping in a year to increase their earning utilising the char land with diversified crops. They initially benefitted and it became a popular practice among other char dwellers as well. They are now introduced to the practice of utilising the land all through the year, although selection of the crops requires more critical analysis to sustain the benefit.
- Easier access to the agricultural services with government service providers opened the door for experimentation in agricultural practices. The practice of triple cropping is gaining popularity day by day. The demand for irrigation is increasing along with dependence on diesel. The technology they adopted is energy inefficient (shallow pump) and market dependent (seed, diesel, fertilizer). But members of the farmers' association use organic fertilizer to reduce the use of chemical fertilizer. They are aware about the environment as well as health hazard of chemical fertilizer. However, farmers are yet to be aware of what to cultivate and how to cultivate for their long term benefits. They have yet to create a proper plan which will take climate resilience into their consideration. For example, they are cultivating maize as part of triple crop production and they are becoming more and more dependent on irrigation pumps and diesel for production. At the same time, farmers are dependent on the market to produce maize and are trapped in the system of selling produce in advance of yield. Sufficient knowledge of such practice, long-term planning addressing environment friendliness, and pro-poor strategies might bring considerable progress in the char.

"I did not need to go to mainland frequently in last 5 years. Yesterday, I went there after three months. I don't know when I will go there next. Maybe it will take 6 months. Previously, when there was no haat here, I had to move there twice a week. When there was this haat but it was low, I had to visit mainland three times a month. Travel cost was 40 taka per visit during that time. Now per visit cost is doubled but as I do not need to visit mainland anymore it does not cost me. This haat is important for me as I can consult with others here about my cultivation work. Besides, the cultural performances organized here at this haat once a year (gaazir gaan, bichar gaan) are the source of recreations for the char dwellers. Men and women both enjoy the performances all through the night. The market committee arranges this program and everybody contributes to give honorarium to the singers and performers. Sale also increases as around 5000 people gather here."

*-Rafiq, a customer at Mohon Miar Notun Haat*

This progress would help to avoid the long-term damage to the land and to the farmers' economic potential.

- Before the plinth was raised there were only a few shops in the market in rainy season since it was very difficult and risky to run the business. This impact of seasonality on market access and transactions has turned around after the plinth raise of the marketplace. It even contributed to increasing employment opportunities for both

Shirin started a tea stall in the haat about two months ago. According to Shirin, her husband has been out of work for 8 years due to this physical ailment. Before starting tea stall, she used to be involved in agricultural work at the crop field which became almost impossible for her to continue alone. Now she makes profit worth of 300 Taka from the investment of 500 taka every day. She also gets assistance from her husband for operating this stall. "It has never been uncomfortable or embarrassing for me being a woman and shopkeeper at the haat.

**- Shirin, a woman entrepreneur.**

- men and women. Now, the number of entrepreneurs has increased. Entrepreneurs are not only men; now women are also becoming entrepreneurs.
- Women entrepreneurs in the marketplace are playing a role to increase women's mobility in the public places at char. Generally, women's mobility is socially restricted in the marketplace and beyond the char land. There is no hard and fast rule but there are social restrictions. Now, the number of women entrepreneurs is increasing. For example, five women started businesses including tea stalls and tailoring shops. Hence, women customers have started visiting the marketplace more frequently.
- In the marketplace a shop has been set up with internet connection run. The owner of the shop has very little knowledge about internet browsing. He is trying to gather more skills for his business initiative. This internet shop has the potential of being used as a source of information. Pharmacies have been set up and extended in the marketplace. This is contributing to the availability of medicine to the char dwellers. As the entrepreneurs say, the improved condition of the market has resulted the increase in number of customers and transactions, for which they have set up, renovated and extended these shops.
- A store house has been built in the marketplace which provides facilities for storing goods to be sold to the buyers coming from the mainland. It has brought an opportunity to the local producers to sell surplus products with a better market linkage and fair price.

## Challenges in operation

- To manage adequate land both for the sub-center and the market occupying the same territory was a challenge initially. But engaging the community in selecting a suitable location and fixing the height of the plinth helped to solve the issue. This development of the land helped the local people and market committee to manage it smoothly.
- The members and the chairman of the Union Parishad lobbied for other locations, everyone had their choices for their own working areas. Managing such vested interest of different local leaders was a challenge for the group members but they were able to manage such conflicts through consultation among the people and leaders.
- It was revealed that transferring external funds to UP was a problem as they did not have any experience of getting such funding. The bank account of the UP was being maintained solely for government allotted funds, and they had no idea how to get external fund. The issue was solved with a simple step taken after series of discussions with lawyers, secretary and chairman of the Union Parishad. A separate bank account was created bearing the name of North Channel UP for this project under the tripartite agreement.
- Politically influential local people's intrusion in implementation and maintenance of the marketplace and sub-center are hampering access of marginalised farmers and retailers who sell their product in 'haat days'<sup>11</sup> only. This haat previously was exempted from 'daak'<sup>12</sup> but as it has grown fast in size and number of transactions, it has drawn the attention of the locally affluent people and had been taken under 'daak'. Now this politically influential people are charging all the sellers, even those who do not have shops need to pay tax (toll) against their sell. Hence, a risk has emerged here- the marginal sellers might face problems in accessing the market which had not been projected during implementation.

## Conclusion

ActionAid's analysis<sup>13</sup> shows that vulnerability is primarily caused by three factors: i) social exclusion; ii) the Lack of skills, access to basic services and economic opportunities; and iii) the Lack of assets and secured access to natural resources. Combined efforts with different programmes and projects addressed all three components indicating a stronger resilience at North Channel union. People of the char have been mobilized through community circles, and the local government was sensitised through long-term programs. The project, taking

<sup>11</sup> Specified weekly days of market when retailers from distant places come sell their product in the marketplace and a gathering takes place

<sup>12</sup> Lease for collecting toll on selling products and services.

<sup>13</sup> Harjeet Singh and Jessica Faleiroi, *ActionAid's Discussion Paper on Resilience*, May 2013, Pg 6

the opportunity of that base, then facilitated the process of bridging the local government and community people. This resulted in solid contextual demand-based outcome for the community. Now it is time for the community group members to develop stronger negotiation skills independent of AAB and partner organisation. There is a huge potential in the char in terms of natural resources and human resources. Women’s mobility in the public space is a doorway that has been opened and can accelerate development. Better utilisation of the char land as well as its soil quality and consumption need of char dwellers, can balance the high production cost incurred due to infrastructural barriers. Better understanding of monetary transactions and market dynamics is also a concern for further work. Nevertheless, the geographical and demographic context is significant for comprehensive development of the char. The future path of the development, initiated here, will be smoother, if the lessons learned are addressed in further planning.



*Union sub-centre, bridging the mainland and the char area making some of the public services available to char dwellers*

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- **Nobiul Islam**, working in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability team of ActionAid Bangladesh, helped in data collection and review of the document.



Learning Document 18

# Women's Collectives: Empowering Grassroots People

*Kamrul Islam  
Md. Helal Uddin  
Shamima Nawshin*

*Kabita Rani and Narendranath, happy couple sharing unpaid care work at home. Kabita is a members of 'Chader Alo' women's collective at Gaibandha*



Photograph by Zinat Hasiba

*Overcoming many socio-cultural challenges, 94 Women's Collectives (WC) consisting of 1264 women in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat, emerged as a collective bargaining agency. The collectives have made significant contributions in increasing women's mobility, networking, and access to public services. Getting engaged in the decision making process in family and community, the members of the collectives have gained control over their income and access to market for their products. By establishing market space for women to move ahead with their collective enterprises, they have promoted women's access to market. While getting engaged in all these initiatives, WCs reached community people, particularly men, for recognition, redistribution and reduction of unpaid care work done by women. They have made this happen introducing a time diary, a tool to make spouses realize how much time and effort women give for care work for which they get no return. Finally, they have set an example of the distribution of unpaid care work among communities by establishing a daycare center. It, in turn, is contributing to increased involvement of women in income generating activities, ensuring safety and learning environment for children at the same time. These contributions are linked with SDG goal 5 - `Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls` with a cascaded target of recognizing and valuing unpaid care work among others. Undoubtedly, Women's Collectives worked as the catalyst for grassroots women in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat.*

*ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) took the initiative of forming Women's Collectives in these two northern districts of Bangladesh from 2006-2007 through its Local Rights Programs (LRPs). Subsequently, WCs have been nurtured through a project titled as `Strengthening Women Collectives in Bangladesh, India and Nepal` supported by European Commission, aiming towards increasing women's access to, and control over, resources and decent work. Aligned with this, Women's Collective set their objective to increase social, economic, and political empowerment of marginalised women.*

*These lessons have been encapsulated to disseminate the best practices of Women's Collectives on women's social, economic and leadership development. Data collected through writing workshops, focus group discussion, case study, and family visit in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat during October-November 2015 have been analysed to come up with the lessons in this document.*

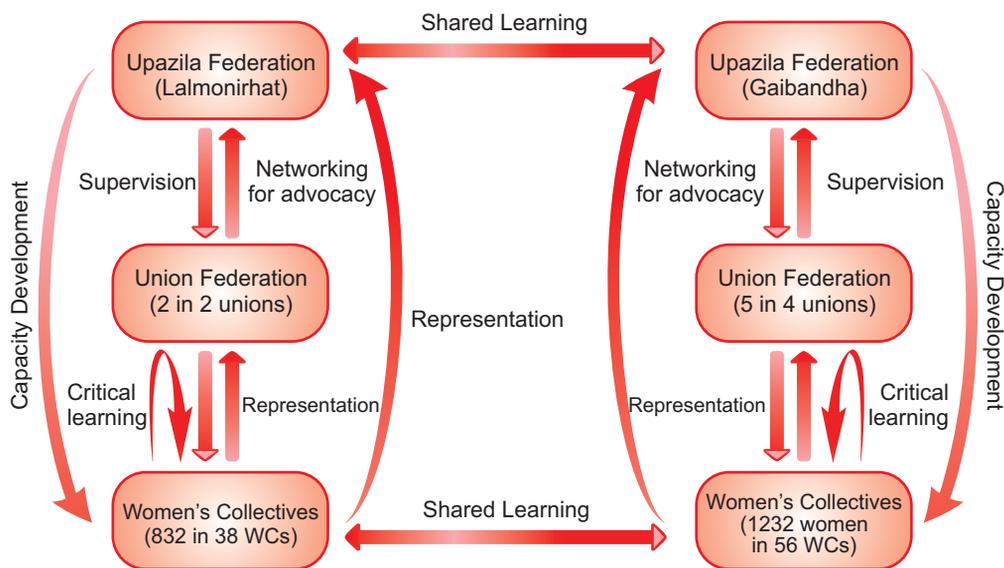
## Introduction

Women in Bangladesh engage disproportionately in unpaid care work that includes cooking, household maintenance, care for the elderly family members and child care. Recently AAB completed a research (2014) named “Pattern of Time Use of Adult Women and Men in Rural North Bangladesh” where it was found that women, on average, spent 6 hours 40 minutes doing unpaid care work in a day<sup>14</sup>, which is not recognised by their family, the society, or the state as a whole. Directly or indirectly, this leads them lagging behind in terms social and economic empowerment. As a result, women have little or no access to, and control over, their income and other resources. It also constrains them from taking the role of social leaders and decision makers. It makes them prone to poverty, violence, poor health, malnutrition, etc. Hence, to increase women’s social, economic and political empowerment, AAB in collaboration with partner organisations introduced the concept of Women’s Collectives in two northern districts of Bangladesh.

## Women’s Collectives: looking through a different lens

Women’s Collective (WC) is a group of marginalised women organised through Reflection-Action<sup>15</sup> process. They gradually evolved as a collective bargaining agency. The niche area of

**Diagram 1: Structure and interlink of Women's Collectives**



<sup>14</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) report titled “Time Use Pilot Survey 2012” shows that on average time spent by employed woman in household work is 3.6 hours, followed by employed man 1.4 hours and unemployed man and woman in household work is 1.2 and 6.2 hours respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Coherent rights-based participatory method for conscientising and empowering people living in poverty that ActionAid Bangladesh follows to facilitate the change across the level

18 their collectivism which differentiates them from other commonly known community groups is their focus on recognition and redistribution of unpaid care work. This approach of women collective is making their spouses realise the burden of unpaid care work, along with economic and socio-political work, which are placed on women.

There are 94 WCs, which include 2064 marginalised women members. Among these WCs 38 are consisting of 832 members in Lalmonirhat, and 56 are consisting of 1232 members in Gaibandha. The collectives came together with Union Federations and finally at Upazila Federations in both districts. They have segregated their roles over collectives and Federations at union and upazila levels. Each collective has a small management committee of five members to manage the collective's actions and regular meetings, and to communicate with the federations and other networks etc.

### Objectives of Women's Collectives

The specific objectives of the collective are around developing women as agents of change by nurturing their leadership skill. Growing as micro-entrepreneurs with skill and capacity development trainings, collective income-generating activities are important element for the collectives in doing this. Besides, creating an enabling environment had been considered crucial building awareness on gender discrimination, women's rights, and violence against women. All these initiatives are aimed towards achieving recognition of women's contribution made through unpaid work in family and society.

## The way Women's Collectives work

There are two prime factors of Women's Collectives that contributed to strengthen its collectiveness; one is its organisational strength and the other its collective actions.

Women's Collectives have internal communication and linkages between collectives of Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha. They formed an apex body at Union (lowest tier of the local government) and at Upazila (2nd last tier of the local government) level. They have developed relationship with people's organizations such as Kendrio Krishok Maitree (KKM), Prantojan and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Club. In addition, they have formal linkage with local SVAW Committees, Market Management Committees, local Chambers of Commerce and Industries in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat.

Members of the WCs both collectively and individually have made efforts towards their empowerment. Leadership and enterprise development made them confident as leaders for promoting women's rights in the locality. Their efforts in this regard were centered on acquiring basic literacy and numeracy, raising awareness of their members on women's rights, violence against women (VAW), unpaid care work, and mobilising members and other stakeholders at community level. It eventually empowered them to confront the discriminatory practices between women and men.

## Initiatives of Women's Collectives

While moving on with the collectives and its economic activities, the WCs have gone through series of challenges and taken different initiatives to overcome those challenges. In every step, they brought innovations in their actions to troubleshoot the growing problems.

### Time Diary: an eye opening tool for men

Time Diary is a new concept for community people. Time Diary explains Unpaid Care Work (UCW), productive work and non-productive work very clearly. Here, unpaid care work includes household chores, child care, sick and old age care, and cooking. People using this tool noticed how much time they spent in which activities in a day. The objective of maintaining the *time diary* was to keep track record of all unpaid care, productive and non-productive works that women and men are doing daily. Within the collectives both husband and wife committed themselves to maintain the time diary separately. The expected return of this practice was awareness created among husbands to motivate them in sharing unpaid care work. The ultimate goal was to facilitate women's involvement in social, economic and political activities.

Introducing the time diary at the beginning was a big challenge because people believed that doing household chores and taking care of children is women's responsibility. Many people also considered introducing time diary as a threat to their existing conjugal relations. However, WC women members worked together to convince their family members about the positive aspects of maintaining time diary. Spouse forum meetings were arranged to have better understanding about time diary and group activities. Members of WCs found that their family members, in particular husbands, are now sharing the household work and they are encouraging other members of the community to use it.

"My husband did not recognise my work before introducing time diary. I did lot of work but my family did not recognize it as well. Now my husband shares many household work with me which was beyond imagination before using time diary."

*-Masuda Begum, Ekota WC, Lalmonirhat*

"I always advise women collective members on what kinds of product they can produce or keep in their shops to accelerate their sales and make profit. I also look after security related issues of the two employees of this women outlet. Sometimes I also help them to reach home safely."

*- Md. Sattar Hussain, Secretary of Kalir Bazaar Market Management Committee, Gaibandha*

### Women's access to mainstream market

Challenging the stereotypical social context that keeps and approves marketplaces of Bangladesh (in rural area particularly) to be male dominated, Women's Collectives have set two market spaces for women: 'Atmonirvorshil Nari Unnoyon Market' in Gaibandha and 'Aparajita Market' in Lalmonirhat district. They initiated it for reducing the barriers to

market their products as they got engaged in income generating activities collectively as well as individually.

In Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat 94 women collectives are engaged in different income-generating activities like making puffed rice (Muri), Chanachur, husked rice, turmeric powder, paper bag, rope, handloom product, and poultry, livestock, fish culture, etc. Facing barriers in selling their crops and products for a fair price, they looked for alternatives. They found that setting a market space for women producers in local market could promote the sale of their products. Initially, they looked for Khas land (government owned land) to establish women's market space, but did not find any land suitable for their initiative. Finally, they took a plot of land from a private land owner to set their market outlet. Now, in both districts, they have set up their shops on private land and opened the market space in Gaibandha in January, 2015, and in Lalmonirhat in November 2015.

"Overall, the women's market has contributed to increasing our capability of buying and selling products. We are not afraid of going to the market anymore. Now we have the confidence of getting involve with other income generating works".

- Monawara Begum, Bhorer Alo WC, Gaibandha

As mentioned above, the infrastructure of local market is not women-friendly, considering different facilities and social practices. Hence making market women friendly became the target of this initiative. The women's market space made a difference by providing a meeting room, an outlet, a store room, drinking water and toilet facilities. In Gaibandha this market space is actually taking care of unpaid care work by running a daycare center along with it. This facilitates the access to market for the members by keeping their kids safe during the working hours. Besides, WCs and Women's Market Space Management Committees (WMSMC) are discussing about sexual harassment in marketplace. Along with local Market (Bazaar) Committee, they are working to build awareness among buyers, sellers and mass people to prevent it. This market space can be considered as an innovative idea for building economic alternatives.

There is a management committee of the women's market space. Representatives of WCs being members of the committee look after the all activities of the marketplace. In Gaibandha the committee is comprised of 9 women and in Lalmonirhat the committee has 11 women members. They communicate with market committee, business associations, and buyers and collect orders for products and inform the WCs for supplying product accordingly.

Recently, both market spaces have planned to set up Information Communication and Technology (ICT) support. In Gaibandha, they are already equipped with a smartphone, internet connection and computer. It helps them to manage information on production and selling of products. It also helps them communicate with shopkeepers, buyers and producers. Gradually, the market space is becoming an information channel between producers and buyers.

## Community managed Daycare Center to redistribute care work

In Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat, like other part of Bangladesh, women are solely responsible for unpaid care work. AAB's study<sup>16</sup> shows that women spent 5.7 hours (men 1 hour) in care work in Gaibandha and 7.1 hours (men 1.2 hour) in Lalmonirhat daily, but it is not recognised by the family, society and state as a whole. The burden of unpaid care work confines women from enjoying their full social, political and economic rights. Taking care of children is a significant part of these care works. In general, women hold the responsibilities of child care in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat, as in other parts of Bangladesh. Its intensity confines women to attend other social, economic and political activities.

Initially, WCs developed understanding and awareness on UCW among collectives' members. They also took initiatives to sensitise their spouses and other men in their families through Spouse Forum meeting and drama 'Ekjon Kulsumer Paala'. Introducing a time diary also contributed significantly to build understanding on unpaid care work among the members of WCs and their spouses. In addition, they have taken action to sensitise local government and local administration on recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work. Finally, introducing daycare center in rural areas like Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat WCs initiated redistributing the burden of UCW at community level.

Participation in income-generating activities through women collectives has opened the opportunity for women to improve their living standard. However, it was difficult for them to attend meetings and the income

Particulars	Gaibandha	Lalmonirhat	Total
No. of Daycare center	6	2	8
No. of Children	129	60	189
Age group	6 months - 4 years		

generating activities of the collectives due to the burden of care works for their children. No one was there to look after the children at home when mothers were attending collective meeting or other activities of the collective. Hence, the members of the Women's Collectives decided to introduce daycare centers in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat.

A maximum of 30 children can enroll in a daycare center. Women involved in income-generating activities keeping their children in the center with some other community children. A management committee of each center is responsible for regular supervision, arranging parent meetings, collecting fees for Facilitators etc. The Facilitators

"I worked in a Char area which is very far from my village and there is nobody in my home to look after my daughter. After establishing daycare center, I keep my daughter here without any hesitation and tension. This place is so safe and my daughter also get chance to learn different things."

- Lata, community woman from Rajpur, Lalmonirhat

<sup>16</sup> Simeen Mahmud, *The pattern of time use of adult women and men in rural North Bangladesh*, Dhaka, ActionAid Bangladesh, May 2014, P.15

18 support the center voluntarily, though the parents contribute financially with a minimum honorarium for them. Currently 129 children (aged 6 months to 4 years old) and 125 women are benefitting from the daycare center. Women who are involved in income-generating activities can keep their children in the daycare center. Thus daycare center is contributing to both pre-school learning for children and facilitating greater involvement of women in income generating activities.

There are challenges in managing the day care center in rural context and Women's Collectives are addressing them. They have consulted with the members, local community leaders, parents, members and chairmen of Union Parishads and discussed the challenges. With the support from different stakeholders they have set up daycare centers in both districts. WCs and the other members of the community provided support for arranging rooms; they selected facilitators from the community, secured contributions from the parents (Tk. 25.00 per month) for paying the salary to the facilitators. WCs are now discussing with the Local Government for long term support to these day care centers.

"I went for group meeting and I kept my son with my mother-in-law. While playing in the courtyard my son got burnt. That day, my husband yelled at me and said you have to decide between family and collective. So I decided to leave my family and thought if I have a secure place where I and mothers like me keep their children without any tension."

- Shova from Sangrami WC, Gaibandha

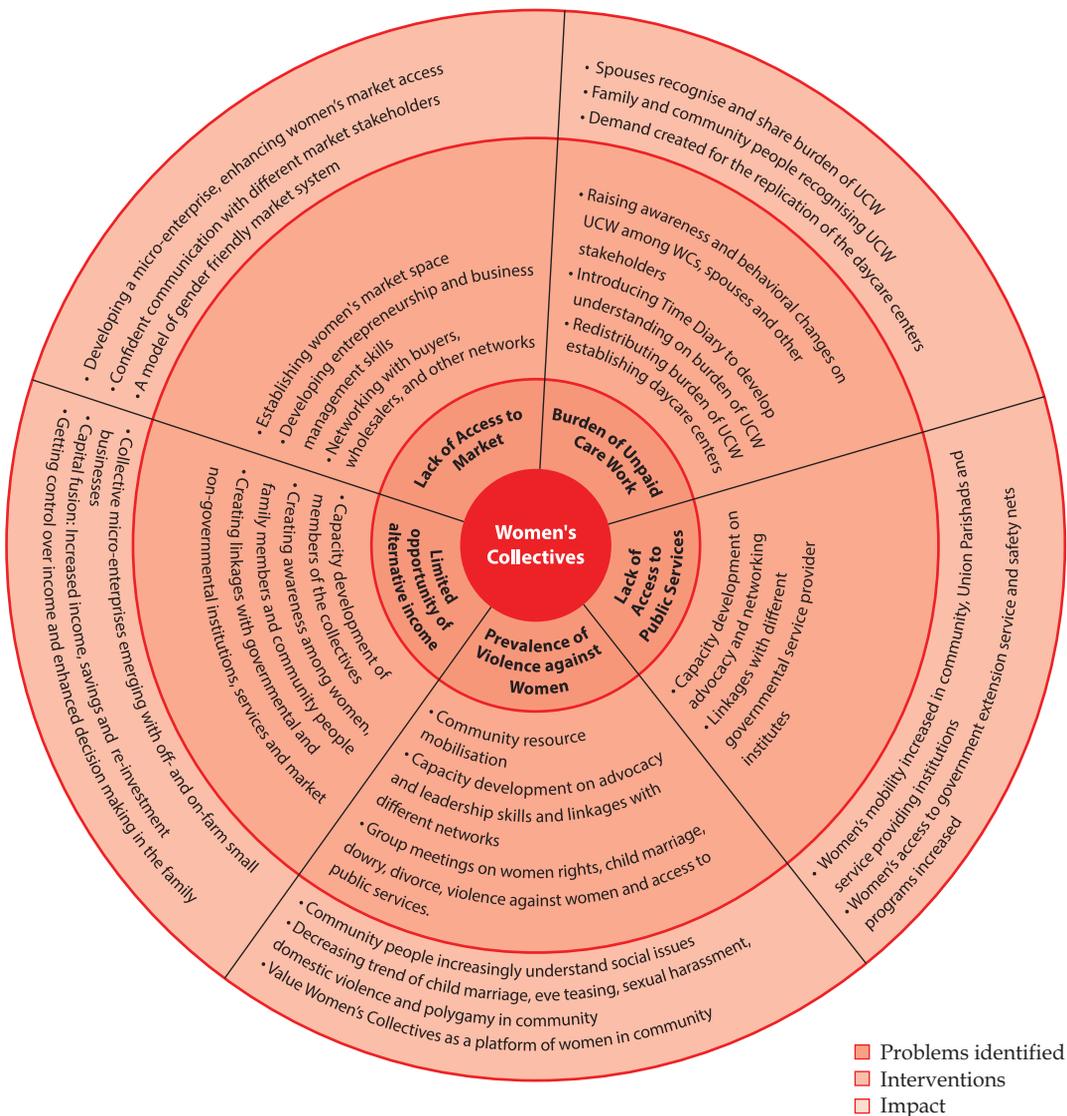
They have also developed a plan for the future and the key activities they have identified are:

- Organising a visit of the Union Parishad members in the daycare center by the group members. Communicate with the Union Parishad through Federation and local stakeholders so that UP allocate budget for operating daycare centers.
- Lobbying for latrines and tube wells for the center, communicating with the Union Parishad and contacting the upazila level office of Directorate of Primary education to provide snacks to children through the management committee of daycare center.
- Arranging beds, glasses and jugs for children, motivating the parents/guardians through consultation meetings.
- Encouraging children to make sports items using local materials.

# Changes made by Women's Collectives

Changes brought by the initiative of Women's Collectives in social, political and economic aspects in women's lives in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat can be visualised through the following diagram.

Figure 2: Interventions and changes made through Women's Collectives



## Attitude in care work

Maintaining time diary had substantial impact on household maintenance and increasing women's social, economic and political participation. Spouses of the collective members recognised that women are sharing disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and came forward to share a lot of the household works that women used to do. For instance, husbands started sharing the responsibilities of cooking, taking care of children, cleaning houses, and feeding domestic animals. As a result, women get more time to engage in income-generating activities, including family, personal and collectives IGA. Maintaining the time diary has also increased mutual understanding between spouses and consequently facilitated improved spousal relations.

"Now we could understand women do too much work in a day and those were unrecognised. But all people of the community including men are helping their wives that were not doing earlier".

- Azizur, husband of Albeda, Lalmunirhat

"My husband never shared care work at home and even never recognized it before. Attending spouse meetings and using the time diary, my husband has become sensitized. Now he always helps me at home. He was criticized by other community people but he did not pay any attention to those words."

- Ayesha Begum, member, Jamuna WC, Gaibandha

## Means for care work redistribution

The daycare center is contributing to the achievement of the goal of Women's Collectives by redistributing the burden of unpaid care work at community level. The people in adjacent areas have become interested in opening daycare centers and are communicating with WCs on this regard. The WCs' output created a scope for expanding the initiatives to other areas. Ms. Anjuna Begum, member of Shukher Swapno WC and mother of a child of Rajpur Daycare Center in Lalmonirhat mentioned, "Now we can work without tension keeping our children at daycare center. I have some cows from which I earn money. I drop my child at daycare center, after that I go to work in the field for some additional earnings. After coming back from the field, I look after my cows and do the household chores. Now I can attend meeting and trainings regularly. Children are also learning something at the daycare center and they are safer now."

## Women's leadership

All collectives now have at least two to five leaders visible, articulate and capable of negotiating at local level. Some collectives have about half of the members who have potentials to be leader. These leaders are able to engage in formal and informal processes of exercising leadership within their collectives to facilitate collective decision making. They are proactively taking part in different negotiation process, building alliance, and taking action against negative, ineffective and corrupt practices and structures.

However, leadership is still largely nominated or decided by show of hands, not proper election. There have been instances of leaders being replaced (including Federation leaders) by group decision. Nevertheless, second line leadership is more likely to emerge through election.

## Challenges

### In forming Women's Collective

Stereotyped gender norms and practices appeared as major challenge for emergence of Women's Collectives. For example, the formation of women's collectives was challenged at the beginning because many people did not want women to attend meetings and speak in public. Some people even harassed women for going to public places particularly in the market places. Men members of the family were not willing to allow women to sell products in market. Women still face such challenges, but the situation is improving.

### In making access to market

There is no other woman shopkeeper in the market except for collectives' market space in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat. Overall socio-cultural situation is not in favor of women sitting in market. Because of such stereotypical social practices, the caretaker of the market space left the job couple of times.

#### **Bithi Begum loves to introduce herself as leader**

Bithi Begum, chairperson of Padmaful Women's Collective in Gaibandha, has been requested by the local senior citizens to compete as a candidate for reserved seats of Union and Upazila Parishads. But right now she is not ready for such election. She wants to compete in election in next term giving more time and effort for her collectives right now. As she says, "My engagement with Padmaful Women's Collective since 2006 created such space for me in my community people. They know me and my work. That's why they are encouraging me for such competition in election".

Bithi was so introvert and spoke in low tone. She was busy only with unpaid care work before engaging with the collective. "Now I crossed over the boundary of my home, giving speech in meetings confidently and spontaneously. I organize my collectives' members, give support to motivate them to be self-reliant and change their life."

She received leadership training in 2013. She works more on helping ultra-poor beyond the collective in receiving government services. She has participated different roundtable discussions on various social and political issues. She is involved with collective income-generating activities such as fish cultivation. She enjoys a greater role in family decision-making, got respect and recognition from her family and society.

"Now police, UP members and Chairman etc. communicate with me for different information. I also seek their support on different problems. They know me well. Because of collective action of our collectives they all know not only me but our other **women leaders like Reshma (Padmaful WC), Sahera (Shapla WC), Lucky Begum (Ujjal Upahar WC)** as well," she says. She wants all women to become self-dependent and engaged in socio-economic activities. She intends to establish market space for women in all unions of Gaibandha district.

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Making women's market space popular to the local buyers is also a challenge for the collective's entrepreneurs. Diversity and volume of products as well as quality packaging is also identified the challenge to overcome. Communication with buyers and wholesalers needs to be improved.

Members of WCs took different initiatives to address these challenges. Leaders of the Collectives encourage other members to visit the market space regularly so that the persons taking care of the shops do not feel isolated. They are now trying to build good relations with local market management committee and local elected representatives. With support from SKS and ActionAid Bangladesh, WCs are trying to increase their product volume and their skill for quality packaging and effective communication with buyers.

## In establishing Daycare Centre

In establishing the daycare centers, the WCs have faced various challenges. For example, local stakeholders did not support the idea initially; guardians did not want to keep their children at daycare center; Union Parishad did not agree to provide salary for the Daycare Facilitators.

## Conclusion

Initiatives of women's collectives have set examples on how collectivism can empower grassroots women. Analysis of the 'Time Diary' has changed perception about women's contribution within families as well as in the society. Vision of women leaders have also widened in terms of expanding their business as new Collectives in neighboring unions. Most importantly, women's access to and control over resources and decent work have increased which is inspiring other women in Gaibandha and Lalmonirhat. Recognition and redistribution of unpaid care work by introducing time diary and daycare have strengthened the collectives. At a societal level, the Women's Collectives approach is contributing to ensure social networking, prevent child marriage, end violence against women, reduce dowry practice, prevent drug use, and undertake risk reduction initiatives during disasters. The goal will be achieved when will take responsibility for unpaid care work rather than helping women out of sympathy.



*Time Diary, tool used for making couples feel and address the burden of Unpaid Care Work*

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