

CASE STUDY

Generating Livelihood Opportunities for Rural Women through Infrastructure Development



Markets in rural areas allocated spaces for women traders. Photo credit: ADB.

In Bangladesh, improvements in rural roads and markets paved the way for women's empowerment.

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Overview

Infrastructure projects can create jobs for the poor and opportunities for gender mainstreaming. Gender stereotypes should never be seen as constraints to project initiatives for women.

These development concepts were demonstrated by an Asian Development Bank-funded rural infrastructure project to help reduce poverty in 23 districts of northeast and central Bangladesh.

Project snapshot

Dates

- **16 August 2006:** Approval
- **07 October 2013:** Closing

Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$106.85 million: Total Project Cost
Institutions and Stakeholders	<p>Executing agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Government Engineering Department, Dhaka <p>Financing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian Development Bank • Government of the United Kingdom

Development Challenges

Like many rural communities in Bangladesh, the project areas lacked road links and all-weather access to markets and basic services.

Women and children in particular suffered from lack of access to needed services, such as health and education, because these were available only in larger towns.

Inadequate transport infrastructure also meant few livelihood opportunities since most men and women could not take in off-farm jobs.

There was a high incidence of poverty and child labor.

Context

Women in the project areas were mostly engaged in household and farming activities. They have the potential to contribute to the rural economy. However traditional beliefs of what women should or can do and what they should be paid relative to men constrained and made them vulnerable to living in poverty. There were even social norms that prohibited women from buying at a market, let alone selling there.

These practices cost not only women in terms of missed opportunities and income but also their entire households.

Solution

The Rural Infrastructure Improvement Project II was implemented to expand the economic opportunities of the rural poor by improving roads, markets, and other infrastructure. It also increased economic opportunities and public roles for women and improved local governance facilities and capacity.

The project made women empowerment one of its key priorities by:

- developing the entrepreneurship of women by reserving for them market sections in improved or new trading centers and by linking them with microfinance institutions so that they can start and run their own businesses and contribute to the rural economy;
- facilitating rural female beneficiaries' links to different support resources to sustain their livelihood;
- generating employment opportunities by involving them in construction, maintenance, and tree plantation activities through labor contracting societies and by ensuring that, during construction, female laborers are provided with temporary sheds, water, and sanitary facilities; and
- promoting women's participation in local governance and the management of union councils.

Actual Outcomes

The project reduced poverty in the rural communities of the 23 districts of Bangladesh by 9.8%. It improved the living conditions of six million people in the project areas as the average annual household and per capita income increased by 7%.

Improved roads increased women's mobility for economic and social purposes.

Women entrepreneurship was developed.

The project provided women with opportunities to conduct business in the markets by constructing women's sections. A total of 312 shops were constructed and 304 were allocated to women. Around 15% of spaces in open sheds were set aside for women traders.

Over 1500 female members of the labor contracting society were trained to improve their business skills while 233 received training on income-generating activities.

Tailoring and clothing or garments were the two most significant trades, each constituting 24% of total storeowners.

Employment opportunities were generated.

Women received equal wage for construction and road maintenance work. A total of 194 women were also employed for tree plantation through the labor contracting society in 2010. Another 666 women were employed for tree plantation and maintenance of 300 kilometers of union roads and 100 km of village roads for 2 years.

Participation in local governance increased.

Decision-making bodies involved women in their committees and forums. A total of 40 female storeowners selection boards were established, each consisting of eight members and at least two were women.

Women also became part of standing committees. They led at least one-third of project implementation committees in 1,832 union councils. Women's opinion and perception were considered in scheme

selection through 43 stakeholder meetings in 23 districts where 6,900 or one-third of participants were women.

Safer environment for women created.

Separate sitting arrangements with water and sanitation facilities were provided in 55 newly constructed union council complexes.

Women were given access to clean toilets and water facilities in the markets. The storeowners were also oriented on the proper management and maintenance of sanitation facilities.

Eight training courses taught 94 contractors how to provide a conducive work environment for women. Their contracts included provisions to ensure female laborers' safety, security, access to safe drinking water, toilet, and shed for resting and lunch facilities.

Lessons

Efficient rural transport and supporting infrastructure are indispensable to reducing poverty and achieving rapid economic development. These also offer the potential to support women empowerment through appropriate infrastructure designs, new employment opportunities, and management and leadership breaks. These can also be good mechanisms to challenge gender stereotypes and other unfair social norms.

Infrastructure is still generally seen as the exclusive domain of men. More opportunities that would promote widespread understanding of why women should be involved in infrastructure are critical.

Resources

Asian Development Bank. 2010. Rural Infrastructure Improvement Project II. *Gender Equality Results: Case Studies – Bangladesh*. PP. 11-18. Mandaluyong.

ADB. 2015. *Second Rural Infrastructure Improvement Project: Project Completion Report*.



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