



Women empowerment at local level – An innovative approach

1. Introduction

According to the Impact Study on Women Empowerment through Effective, Transparent and Inclusive Local Governance (June 2013) and the Gender Annual Report 2014, a series of issues regarding Gender Equality and Social Equity (GSE) have improved in the last years but according to the study, women still face challenges, especially in cases of taking initiatives and exercising leadership. To provide women with more opportunities for exercising their leadership skills Sharique launched a call for project proposals from partnerships of Union Parishads (UP) and groups of local women. The proposed intervention included a competitive process for UPs and groups of women for the best women-initiated innovative projects.

2. Background

Sharique partnered with Local Government Institutions (LGIs) to boost women's leadership ideas through a competition and granted special funds to three Union Parishads within Sharique, which were able to propose innovative gender sensitive projects designed and managed by local female leaders. The projects were innovative in so far that this was the first time that UPs supported projects that focused on social

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inclusion issues and were conceptualized and implemented under the leadership of women groups. These innovative projects generated a change in people's thinking about women empowerment and through the involvement of the UPs, further budget support and support from the community have the potential to become sustainable. These projects were non-traditional in nature, introducing welfare and rights based approaches. The project aimed at ensuring inclusion of women in each stage of the project cycle management, from planning, design and implementation to monitoring and reporting.

3. Inclusion of women in local governance: the competition

All 207 UPs of the four regions covered by Sharique were invited to participate in the competition. The objectives and outputs of this initiative were as follows:

A. Objectives:

- a) To mobilize local governments (UP) to develop a practice for inclusive projects, particularly initiated by women
- b) To mobilize local governments to include women and specifically marginalized and disadvantaged persons in the project planning and decision-making processes
- c) To support local governments in developing a culture of dialogue with women for considering their needs in the scheme selection
- d) To set an example of spaces of interaction between women and local governments where women have the opportunity to take initiative, to be innovative and mobilize other women around one cause

B. Expected Outputs/Results:

1. Increased awareness for consideration of women's needs while planning and designing schemes and development projects throughout all 207 UPs
2. A series of model projects spread across the four regions of Sharique's areas of intervention are initiated by women leaders and supported by UPs through funds from Sharique and results are shared among the project partner LGs
3. A pattern of collaboration between women leaders and UP members is developed and sustained in at least 10 UPs who develop partnership projects
4. Project sharing events at UP level are conducted to celebrate the new initiatives
5. Selected projects are sustainable and receive acceptance and appreciation from citizens of the given Unions



Local women are engaged in the development of their own project in a consultation meeting

C. Award/Grants:

Sharique decided to award a maximum of ten projects amounting to a **maximum of BDT 800,000 each** to each project. The preconditions set for this scheme were that the project has to be initiated by a female citizen or a group of female citizens and supported by the UP. The project also has to address priority

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issues from the strategic plan of the UP. The criteria for selecting the project for scoring were innovation, poor and disadvantaged beneficiaries, collaboration of community women and UP in designing the project, engagement of women in the whole project cycle management and sustainability.

A thorough, transparent and participatory (regional, PIU, UPs) screening and assessment process ensured that only the most suitable applications were selected. The winning projects were announced in August 2016.

The UPs and the three projects awarded are:

- a) Uttor Bedkashi Union Parishad, Khulna: The project focuses on reducing drop out and irregularity of children's school attendance and support to their education. The project also contributed to raising awareness among the community, UP, Line departments, School Management Committee (SMC) and school teachers on the importance of education and inclusion.
- b) Amadi Union Parishad, Khulna: This project focuses on marginalized disabled persons dealing with their mobility issue and participation in activities and meetings organised by the Union Parishad and the community. By participating at these meetings and events, they are able to speak of their problems and provide their opinion on different issues. The project distributed disability aid among the beneficiaries through the UP in the presence of officials from the Government's Social Welfare department.
- c) Joykolosh Union Parishad, Sunamganj: This project focuses on raising awareness about reproductive health and hygiene among 1835 adolescent girls and 1835 guardians. This ensures that the adolescent girls are familiar with managing their menstruation and managing waste in a healthy and hygienic way.

4. How are the proposed projects?

It was interesting to find out that the women address the issues for the wellbeing of their family members, not their own benefit. Women identified the desire to securing their children's future as one of their key issues, possibly due to not having been able to live the life they dreamed of for themselves. The women were required to develop their action plans with a minimum of facilitation. UPs encouraged their proposals by giving them the responsibility to implement their dream projects by positioning them in the project implementation committees. This helped the women own and engage in the women leadership development process.



Adivasi girl receiving educational materials at the project sharing event

5. Implementation:

As soon as the project received the funding from Sharique, UPs organized meetings with the local women who had worked hard to develop and win the project. The UPs appreciated the honour that these women had brought to the UPs by winning the projects. These prestigious projects increased the commitment to the newly elected Parishads as the UPs got close to the women during the project development and opened their eyes to the challenges that women and disadvantaged families face. This struck a chord with the Union leaders and increased their commitment and they shared this widely during community meetings. The women who developed the projects were recognized as agents of change and their contributions were recognized by the Union Parishad with a small gift at the project sharing meeting.



Adivasi Munda and Mahato community students are taking lessons on the language and basic preparedness to adapt with other students

The projects have also been instrumental to contributing to changes in behavior:

One of the women initiated projects addressed that Adivasi and poor Munda and Mahato children were not getting an education because of language problems. The project is helping them to learn Bangla and as a result, the children are now becoming more and more able and interested to participate in their schools and this is also increasing their willingness and readiness to interact with other students.

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The parents of these children previously let them work in the fields to support the family with their livelihoods; as the result of the project, they are now convinced that the language barriers that hindered their children to follow the class lectures and interact with other students and integrate into the school community can be overcome. They are now sending their children to school to continue their education. The Union Parishad also made a commitment to continue this initiative in the coming years after the project will have ended in December.

There has also been good progress in the other two projects. The mobility of persons with a disability has increased and has allowed them to participate in the Ward Shava in November for UP's planning exercise. Their increase in mobility has also reduced the workload of the women who assisted them previously with moving around.

In Sunamganj, adolescent girls are now being trained in their schools in different groups and this has been being facilitated by the Upazila (sub-district) administration. It is expected that this project will help girls to increase their confidence and help them dealing with and managing the changes of their bodies.

6. Conclusion:

The three women initiated projects provided women with opportunities to address some of their key concerns. It also put them in the spotlight for implementing the projects and working towards change in the communities. The initial outcomes of these small projects are very promising and Sharique aims to understand better what contributed to the change. Change is not something that takes place overnight or by default, and it takes many actors to contribute to making change happen. In the women initiated projects it was obvious that believing in change, the willingness to act accordingly and appreciation and awards through the community are some of the ingredients for change. These small projects have become instrumental for the change in women's behavior – they are now more confident to be part of meetings and raise their issues. The UPs, in turn, have seen what a difference women's involvement can make to community issues. While the women initiated projects were limited in scope, duration and quantity, they have made a mark in the communities and this has been noted. The commitment of the Parishad to keep this effort going is very strong and the UP has made a budgetary provision for this innovative approach – which is evidence of their change in thinking and approach to 'women empowerment'.

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