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A green horizontal band with silhouettes of people and a heart. The silhouettes are in a darker shade of green, and the heart is a lighter shade. The background of the band is a medium green color.

Empowerment of Women through Fisheries and Aquaculture

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ABSTRACT

Banchte Shekha is an NGO based in Jessore, south-west Bangladesh that has supported the development and empowerment of poor people, particularly women. In the CBFM-2 project they found it was possible to involve women in fisheries activities, despite initial opposition from conservative groups. Banchte Shekha was responsible for organizing 7 CBOs in CBFM-2 following their successful experiences with a single CBO in the first phase of the project.

INTRODUCTION

Banchte Shekha (BS) is one of the largest women and children development organization in Bangladesh, established in 1976 based in Jessore in the southeast region of Bangladesh working to improve the socio-economic status of women and children through poverty alleviation and empowerment programs.

In Bangladesh, various beliefs and practices continue to prevent the usage of full potential of women for the benefit of the society. Banchte Shekha, an NGO totally committed to empower women and bring gender equity, was established to assist in changing this scenario. With the support of the WorldFish Center, DoF and other institutions, it seeks to remove existing beliefs and practices that hinder progress. Sustained efforts are yielding results in changing some of the ill practices, resulting in progress in various spheres. In this paper, an attempt is made to document the genesis of Banchte Shekha, to describe its general activities, and to concentrate on its contribution to empowering women through fisheries and aquaculture.

BANCHE SHEKHA AND CBFM

Banchte Shekha started working under the CBFM Project in villages around Goakhola-Hatiara Beel in 1987 following a severe flood. Finding that there were many poor people and especially poor women who were interested to benefit from its activities, the area was brought under Banchte Shekha's normal programme to improve the lives of destitute women. After successful completion of the first phase, Banchte Shekha became involved with the second phase and has been working with 7 beels and 1 river section since September 2001. These water bodies are situated in two Districts namely Jessore and Narail. Banchte Shekha is implementing two types of approaches under the CBFM project, Community managed fisheries and Women managed fisheries to make a comparative study.

Banchte Shekha recognizes the urgent necessity of providing skill to women to gain economic freedom, which is essential to bring gender equity in society. As well as providing skills training, Banchte Shekha has helped to bring awareness

to the women to exercise their duties and rights which should help to change the existing ill practices.

Beneficiaries have a great opportunity through the project to sit together with the NGO representatives, Papilla Fishery Officer and Union Parishad Chairman where they can raise their problems, obstacles, demands, and discuss probable solutions. Through the project they have now been enabled to exchange views with them.

Banchte Shekha started the process by arranging meetings and workshops to discuss overall project objectives with the beneficiaries and then formed participatory management committees. Responsibilities were distributed according to their capability. They have a great opportunity for planning and implementing directly. Now women are skilled enough to carry out the project activities.

A number of income generating activities that are appropriate to women are tailoring, embroidery, vegetable cultivation, fish culture, etc. and have been implemented successfully of several years. Although, some of these are traditionally recognized as activities where men are not usually involved and could be carried out without much difficulty, fisheries and aquaculture being new and normally male dominated activities were more difficult and resulted in the stiff opposition from society.

Women of the community were only housewives before intervention of the project, were fully dependent on their husband's income and made no contribution to their family's maintenance. There was no opportunity to go out from their residence for working as day labourers or in the own cultivable lands. A great change has come among women in associated with the project.

While technology demonstration did not prove too difficult for the women, the stiff opposition by the male and female members of the society at a number of stages could only be overcome through determination to resolve various social problems.

Most of the women could not sign and write before the intervention of the project. But they can now sign and write since they became associated with project groups. They realized that their children need to be educated and so that they are sending their children to the schools. There is a great change observed in behaviour, attitude, and health and clothing also.

The impact of fisheries and aquaculture in bringing gender equity has been very high. Most importantly, the visible economic benefits women were able to derive from various activities has gained them suitable place in the decision making process. Based on the experience of Banchte Shekha in introducing fisheries and aquaculture in the most conservative areas of Bangladesh, it is suggested

that similar activities should be considered favourably in the other parts of the world. Educational programmes on fisheries and aquaculture should employ examples of this nature to enlighten people on the potential of this activity and strategies that need to be adopted when there are social constraints.

As a result of sustained efforts over several years, today there are several groups of women involved in fisheries and aquaculture activities who derive excellent economic and nutritional benefits from these new activities.