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REFLECT, savings and credit in Bangladesh**Fazilatun Nessa, Begum Rokeya and Achintan Mazumder****• Introduction¹**

The Government of Bangladesh and diverse Bangladeshi NGOs have taken a keen interest in women's education and empowerment for over a decade. However, this interest has not translated into significant improvements in women's literacy, their income levels or their social status (UNDP 1997). Programmes tend to be narrowly focused, the most common strategy involving the formation of women's *shomitis*, (savings and credit groups). It is unusual for programmes to address the multi-dimensional needs of women and few focus effectively on strengthening women's own capacity for analysis and decision-making.

There is no doubt that the formation of *shomitis* has created an opportunity to change the economic condition of women, through promoting new forms of income generation for some of the poorest and most excluded women. However, programmes rarely fulfil these opportunities, most notably because women rarely retain control of the credit that they take out from their *shomiti*. Loans are often handed directly to husbands or fathers (or even to brothers or uncles) and are rarely invested for income generating activities. Where men do invest these small loans in potentially profit-making activities, they are rarely activities

which are run by (or even involve) women and women almost never have a say over the use of the profit. Women are only given access to any of the money in order to meet the regular

repayment requirements or to make the forced savings required by the schemes.

• The role of REFLECT

It was precisely in this type of context that REFLECT was first developed in Bangladesh, through a pilot programme with ActionAid in Bhola Island. REFLECT was designed to make ActionAid's long running *shomiti*-based savings and credit programme more sustainable by reducing dependency on ActionAid and enabling the women to manage their own development processes. In our own work in Netrakona, REFLECT was developed in response to a mid-term evaluation of SUS (Sabalamby Unnayan Samity), a local NGO, in 1997. This showed that women had almost no control over the loans they took from SUS *shomitis*. Providing loans to women in such a context does little or nothing to improve women's status in society, rarely leads to increased income for women and is ultimately unsustainable.

In reviewing the existing system, SUS identified a major deficiency as women's inability to influence decision making processes on economic matters within their families. Women needed access to knowledge and skills about starting an effective business if they were to gain any economic power. For example, they needed to know how to select a profitable business, who to contact, how to keep accounts, how to manage a business and how to market products. They also needed communication skills to be able to secure support to start up a business. It was in this context that REFLECT was introduced - the aims being to enable women to:

¹ This article draws on a research project entitled 'Literacy, Gender and Social Agency', which is being supported by DFID.

- gain the literacy and numeracy skills necessary to run their own business;
- develop analytical and business skills; and,
- improve their status within their family and society as a whole.

In both Bhola Island and SUS, participants in REFLECT circles have undertaken a detailed analysis of their social and economic status. They have studied income and expenditure patterns through calendars and have made projections on possible uses of loan money. They have analysed savings and credit through matrices. Indeed, a wide range of detailed graphics have been produced in each circle, addressing everything from health issues to population and mobility.

Progress

Reviewing the progress of circles to date, it is clear that participants are now able to understand and use their savings and credit pass books; they have learnt some business skills and a few business tricks, and they are able to monitor the progress and profit of an income generating activity more closely. Through their exchanges and group analysis, they have also developed a greater understanding of health issues including strategies for both prevention and cure of many local illnesses. They are using local health facilities more regularly and are more mobile from their homes than previously (a significant issue in a very traditional Islamic area).

However, to date there has not been systematic evidence that women have gained a greater say in decision making on economic matters. Loans are still passed to their husbands (or other men in their family) and, although they may now, in some cases, be asked for an opinion, it is still the men who decide on the use of the loan and who retain control of any profits. The social values and cultural beliefs that exclude women from a significant say within the household have not been challenged. SUS has been running REFLECT circles for just one year, so perhaps it is too much to expect such substantive change over a short period. But it may also be that other strategies are required. If women's capacity to secure change depends (at least in part) on attitudinal change amongst men, then it may

be necessary to develop programmes such as REFLECT specifically for men. Although there are limitations to the change which REFLECT circles have brought about over the past year in SUS, there are some positive examples, which indicate that more substantive change may occur in the longer term.

Tahura Begum's story

Tahura Begum is one of the members of an SUS shomiti who joined the REFLECT circle in April 1997. Her initial motivation was to become literate, so that she could help her children with their school work, maintain her pass book and keep some accounts. She had some wider expectation that participation in the circle would help her improve her status within the family and even thought that literacy might enable her to get a job. After nine months in the REFLECT circle, Tahura was interviewed at length. She said that her economic position had improved and she now received more respect from her family and community, who regarded her as 'educated'. She had learnt a number of business skills and could run a small business independently. Specifically she had negotiated with her husband to give up the small poultry farm they were running and start up a business selling bananas in the market, which would be more profitable. Having run the banana business, well she made some profit, which she then invested in buying a Sallow machine (an irrigation pump) together with some other women from the REFLECT circle. She has recently planted some fruit trees, commercial trees and medicinal herbs and plants. Tahura now has a bank account in her own name where she is able to deposit profits to save for improving the family home (for example she has built a pit latrine) and investing in her business

Tahura has now enrolled her daughter in school for the first time and helps her with homework. She even helps to teach her husband in the evenings. Her opinion is now actively sought by both her husband and other people in the community and her advice is well respected. Indeed, several people in her immediate community suggested that she should stand as a candidate in the Local Council Elections. She chose not to, as she

recognised that she was not yet well enough known in the wider community. However, in the future she feels that anything may be possible.

Jahan Ara's story

Jahan Ara is a 36 year from the Islampur slum area of Netrakona who makes a living as a biri-maker (rolling small cigarettes from local tobacco). She said that her main reasons for joining the REFLECT circle were so that she could teach her own children, read letters from her parents, avoid being cheated by shopkeepers, read signs and addresses in the city and understand her pass book. She reported that the most valuable outcomes of the REFLECT process were that she could now:

- understand alternative ways of improving her economic status;
- run a small business, keeping accounts and monitoring profits; and,
- improve the health and hygiene of the family environment.

Some of the specific ways in which she sees the REFLECT circle as having helped her include the following:

- she took out a loan to invest with her husband in a rickshaw (ensuring he provides for the repayments and she is given 25 taka a day - about 50p) which is proving profitable;
- she now visits relatives and neighbours and regularly goes to the hospital and market alone (which was very rare previously) feeling confident about orienting herself around town; and,
- she has been able to actively support a local candidate's campaign in the recent election.

• Conclusion

REFLECT is still in its infancy, but the early indications are that it has proved effective in promoting some change to women's status when linked to a savings and credit programme. Women have improved their economic understanding and have acquired some practical skills for starting up businesses. The status of some women in their family and

community has improved, but for many others the process of change will take longer, as cultural beliefs and attitudes are deeply rooted. It is unclear whether the REFLECT approach alone has secured these changes or whether the savings and credit programme has been an essential part of the process, but it is clear that a savings and credit programme alone is unlikely to lead to such change.

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