

LEADERSHIP TRAINING FOR VILLAGE WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

Destitute and underprivileged rural women are rarely considered as an important target group for educational programmes. In Bangladesh, however, the Swanirvar Movement, with government support, has developed an original leadership training programme for village women.

Organised in the form of three-day workshops, the contents and methodology of the programme are based on the women's needs and Swanirvar's former field experience. Discussions range over the women's status and roles in village development; notions of family planning, health, nutrition, and child care; the organisation of income-generating activities; resource identification; ways to establish contact with service agencies; and project planning and implementation. In the 57 workshops organised to date, for the most part in rural areas, some 4966 participants have been trained for leadership. As a result, 1778 women's groups have been formed around income-generating activities, and 854 women's cooperatives have sprung up. The leadership training programme has in addition had a multiplier effect in many other areas, and is continuing to expand.

REACHING RURAL WOMEN, A NEW NATIONAL CONCERN

In Bangladesh, the female population constitutes 48.43 million of the total population of 80 million, over 90 per cent living in the rural areas. These Bangladeshi rural women form a nation within a nation. Deprived of their rights, forced into domestic drudgery, destined to early marriage, subjected to frequent child bearing, suffering from severe malnutrition and the victims of high mortality rates (38 per cent higher than the male death rate), their lives are a constant struggle for survival. The lack of job opportunities (out of a total civilian labour force of 25.18 million, only 6.4 million are women), their economic dependence on men, and their low literacy rate (13.7 per cent as against men's literacy rate of 29.9 per cent) have led them into a state of helplessness. Furthermore, women's contribution at home is not accounted for in the Gross Domestic Product. They have been considered economically unproductive and left outside the purview of the development process. Thus, until recently, the participation of women in development activities had been negligible.

However, towards the end of the country's first Five-Year Plan period, that is, by 1976-78, the Government initiated action to integrate women into the development process. Recent evidence of increasing women's participation suggests a positive policy shift.

INTEGRATION OF A SELF-RELIANCE MOVEMENT INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In view of the socio-economic condition of women, the Swanirvar (SWR) Movement has launched a women's development programme in eleven thanas (the lowest administrative units), in line with the government policy for improving women's status. Initially a non-governmental organisation, the Swanirvar (self-reliance) Movement gained formal government recognition and support on 25 September 1975 as part of the aim to promote overall village development through the maximum use of local resources by village-based organisations.

In 1976, a large number of workshops were held all over Bangladesh to introduce a common format for village surveys, village planning, and programme implementation on a self-help basis by villagers, involving all the various sectors, such as farmers, landless workers, women, youth, and other groups. During this series of workshops, 399 men and 53 women were identified as the best workers, and later on became the trainers for the entire SWR Programme. In 1977, SWR activities were integrated into the work of the union councils (units composed of a number of villages), and thus emerged a new system of *Gram Sarkar* (village government) which has now been accepted as a national development strategy by the Government of Bangladesh. Thus this innovative programme has offered the nation a new insight, a new strategy, a new approach for mass mobilisation at the grass-roots level for the improvement of the quality of life. For this challenging task, the SWR Movement won several national awards in recognition of its outstanding people-oriented programme.

ORGANISATION OF COURSES TO PREPARE TRAINERS

The first institutional course in leadership and organisation and management skills was conducted in 1977 by Proshika, a non-governmental organisation involved in the organisation of group-based economic activities for the landless. At the request of the SWR Movement, a training course was organised at the Village Education Resource Centre (VERC) in Savar for the core team of 42 male and 30 female SWR workers, who were subdivided into smaller groups for training purposes. The contents of the training programme included:

- the identification of possibilities for the creation of organisations at different levels; organisational planning and management;
- the preparation and execution of a village survey;
- resource identification, mobilisation, and utilisation;
- project planning;
- leadership training;
- the role of trainers;
- documentation;
- training/evaluation.

Soon after this first leadership course at the VERC, a team consisting of five men and three women led a training programme for 78 workers at Jhopkhali Village of Betagi Thana from 13 December 1978 to 21 January 1979. Betagi thus became a field training site, serving to enlarge the core team of 88 men and 60 women trainers to meet the immediate need of the SWR training programme.

RECOGNITION OF THE NEED TO TRAIN VILLAGE WOMEN FOR LEADERSHIP

Until this time, the landless and underprivileged rural women had never had the opportunity to be associated with an educational process, nor were they considered worthy of being exposed to a new learning process.

Launched at that very critical time when a political will began to crystallise in favour of women's advancement and their integration into the

development process, the SWR planners and workers felt the need for women to be involved also in mobilising the rural population. Many village women, even those who were illiterate, destitute, and landless, demonstrated leadership abilities.

SWR workers identified those women who were under comparatively less pressure from domestic responsibilities and who showed potential for assuming leadership roles. In 1978, with UNICEF assistance, leadership training for disadvantaged rural women was formally launched in eleven thanas in which the SWR Movement was intensively involved.

OBJECTIVES OF THE COURSES ORGANISED FOR RURAL WOMEN

These workshops were spread over the districts of Tangail, Rangpur, Jessore, Chittagong, Patuakhali, Bogra, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Basirah, Comilla and Noakhali. Their objectives were to:

- provide village women with the opportunity to acquire leadership techniques that they could then transmit to fellow villagers, both men and women;
- identify among the village leaders a core group which would receive advanced training in basic skills in agriculture and related fields;
- foster self-confidence in their ability to find solutions to their problems, with supportive services from government agencies and non-government agencies;
- increase their awareness of the improvement in their status which could be achieved through income-generating activities;
- broaden their vision by helping them to identify opportunities and resources, and ways of using them;
- encourage the establishment of basic services and promote community participation in the organisation of these services.

CONTENTS BASED ON LOCAL WOMEN'S NEEDS

Since the target group was landless women at the grass-roots level, the training course was built on the innovative practices developed out of field experience, without any impositions from a power base. It moved at its own rhythm, in harmony with the rural setting, based on the needs of local women. In other words, it was a programme planned from the bottom, and its contents were developed out of need and experience. Thus the areas covered were:

- explanation of the SWR concept;
- discussion of women's status and role in village development activities;
- adult literacy, notions of family planning/health/nutrition/child care;
- resource identification;
- group formation;
- income-generating activities, savings;
- project planning and implementation;

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- ways to establish links with resource organisations and service agencies;
- leadership development;
- the role of SWR workers.

FIFTY-SEVEN WORKSHOPS FOR OVER 4000 WOMEN

From November 1978 to June 1980, 57 leadership training workshops for women were organised at different levels. Though the target group was under-privileged women, as a result of the fact that, in the villages, women like to be accompanied by a *sathi* (escort, preferably a man), about one-fifth of the participants were male. The following table indicates the breakdown by type of training and number of participants.

	<i>No. of workshops</i>	<i>Participants</i>
Thana level	42	3483
Division level	4	200
Bangladesh Agricultural University*	9	455
National level	2	828
	57	4966

* Advanced training in agricultural skills

EMPHASIS ON IMPARTING NEW CONCEPTS AND EXCHANGING EXPERIENCES

The duration of the workshops was limited to three days. The day started at 5 a.m. with an SWR awakening song and continued until midnight with a closing song composed by one of the workers. Working sessions consisted of both formal and non-formal training, including the narration of success stories, songs, drills, and field visits which opened up new horizons for the rural women, who had had little opportunity for relaxation and entertainment. (An invitation from a circle officer - the administrative head of the thana - to a three-day trip for a local group generated tremendous enthusiasm.) The morning working sessions were devoted to new concepts and information. Village visits in the afternoon broadened their comprehension of total village development and the evening meetings provided an informal atmosphere for an exchange of views, and the after-dinner sessions served as a time for taking stock of the day's work.

SOME EARLY RESULTS

Upon their return to their villages, the trainees organised individual or group projects according to the availability of resources for income-generating activities. Some have formed cooperatives in order to have

access to the credit facilities needed for a better implementation of their projects. They have worked as motivators of development activities and as change agents. In all, 1473 villages have been reached by the SWR programme.

Pooling of Resources for Income-generating Activities

Within these villages, after the first round of training, 1978 small groups were formed for the purpose of organising income-earning activities. The women pooled and invested their resources without any financial assistance from an external agency. As their activities generally brought them an income ranging from Tk.50 to Tk.250 per month, their status as economically productive members of the family was enhanced. The activities in which these village groups engaged are as follows:

<i>Activities</i>	<i>No. of groups</i>
Poultry raising	627
Vegetable cultivation	308
Cottage handicrafts	298
Goat or cattle raising	268
Dhaki (rice husking)	160
Pisciculture	117
	1778

Multiplier Effect in Training

Training programmes have also been organised for 410 women *ansars* (members of a government para-military defence force which also engages in social work) and 1520 women Village Defence Party members who in turn serve as the trainers of other women recruited from time to time. As under the new Gram Sarkar System women are represented in the village government; 622 of these women members have also been trained.

Access to Credit from Commercial Banks

Trained women leaders have succeeded in establishing a link with commercial banks which extend credit facilities to small landless groups without any collateral. At present, in all the thanas in which the SWR works, women have access to credit facilities through banks in the rural areas.

Creation of 854 Women's Cooperatives

As a result of the leadership training, 854 women's cooperatives have been formed. Cooperatives organised by other groups also benefit from the presence of women leaders trained by the SWR. The following table reflects the general impact of the SWR Movement on village development as at July 1980.

	<i>No. of cooperatives</i>	<i>No. of members</i>	<i>Savings in Tks.*</i>
Agricultural cooperatives	815	25972	540496
Women's cooperatives	854	19949	247442
Youth cooperatives	814	18955	527371
Farmer/labour cooperatives	766	16950	136797
Other cooperatives	949	31724	2092795
	<u>4198</u>	<u>113550</u>	<u>3544901</u>

(*Taka: 15 Tk = approximately 1 US dollar)

Production of Training Materials

The establishment in May 1980 of a cell to develop training materials and carry out follow-up action added another dimension to the leadership training programme.

Links with Other Women's Development Agencies

A Women's Advisory Committee has also been set up with relevant government officials and non-government representatives in order to ensure coordination between the various women's development agencies. Communication between the SWR and other women's development agencies has thus been facilitated.

Establishment of a Research and Evaluation Cell

For the purpose of internal evaluation and action-oriented research, the SWR has established a Research and Evaluation Cell in its central office in Dhaka. The gathering of documentation on each activity is one of the prime responsibilities of the cell, as lack of data severely handicaps the formulation of future plans of action.

ORGANISATION AND FINANCING

Eight coordinators (four women and four men) under the supervision of the Chief Project Field Coordinator are responsible for the planning, implementation and supervision of field training. Sixteen assistant coordinators (50 per cent women) act as resource persons in their respective locations. Forty village women have been reoriented to serve as trainers.

The leadership training programme was financed by UNICEF and an amount of Tk.859,000, or US\$ 57,333 has been spent for the purpose. The costs of SWR workshops are kept to a minimum. The workshops are organised in the rural areas. The trainees' travel to the site is paid by the SWR, and they are usually housed in primary schools or community centres.

EVALUATION: POSITIVE RESULTS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY PLANNING

The SWR Movement has received increasing support for training from Rural Development Academies, the National Institute of Public Administration,

Proshika, VERC, and relevant non-government organisations. An evaluation carried out by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in the field of population control revealed that in some SWR villages, the natural growth rate has been brought down to 1 per cent as against a national average of 2.8 per cent. As a result, increasing support for SWR activities is being received from the Ministry of Population Control and Family Planning.

Another evaluation carried out by a composite team of various organisations such as the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, the Bangladesh Agricultural University, the National Institute of Public Administration, the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, and Proshika concluded that a solid base has been created for organised efforts towards self-reliance in the project thanas. People's organisations at various levels are effective tools for sustaining the momentum generated.

AN EXPANDING PROGRAMME

The task lying ahead for the SWR Movement is to undertake intensive education and support programmes at the village and union levels. These programmes require further leadership training. As a result, a programme of 42 more workshops in leadership skills for 4800 rural women and their *sathis* has been initiated with UNICEF assistance covering the period from October 1980 to June 1982. Through a multiplier effect, the rural population, and particularly the women and children of the 20 selected thanas, will receive direct and indirect benefits from this training programme. This represents a population of some 30,000 rural women, men and children.

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