

Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment

Summary Report

The Rural Maintenance Program: A Cash for Work Program

Original Report: Victor C. Robinson, October 2006

Information on RMP

Districts: **61 Districts**

Unions: **4,200**

Donors: **EC, CIDA,
Government of Bangladesh**

Number of Program
Participants: **166,750**

Time Frame: **1983-2006**

Number of Staff: **614**

Background

The aim of CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII¹) is to better understand CARE International's contribution to women's empowerment and gender equity. The global research protocol uses a framework based on three interrelated dimensions or faces of empowerment: agency, structure and social relations. Within this broad analytical framework, each participating country office has designed its own Strategic Impact Inquiry taking into account the ways in which gender relations are shaped by local and national contexts. In Bangladesh, the SII was initiated with a study that looked at the notion of women's empowerment from the perspective of individuals and groups within local society². Following this, detailed impact inquiries were conducted in three CARE projects. This summary captures the main findings, recommendations and implications arising out of the study that focused on the Rural Maintenance Program, a cash for work program that employed able-bodied destitute women in the maintenance of rural earthen roads. The Rural Maintenance Program was a late addition to the initiatives included in the SII. It was a much larger and longer-term program in contrast to the other initiatives studied. With the program scheduled to be handed over in 2006, and with its 20-year country-wide history, CARE felt it was important that its legacy be more closely examined.

Program Description

Objectives

CARE's legendary Rural Maintenance Program (RMP) began as a pilot in 1983 and continued until 2006. The goal of the program was to contribute to long-term sustainable socio-economic development of rural Bangladesh. The objectives were:

- To provide year-round employment to approximately 42,000³ destitute rural women.
- To train, counsel and support the RMP women in life management skills to enable them to become self reliant.
- To maintain 84,000 kilometers of important rural earthen roads and feeder roads
- To enable local governing bodies such as Upazila Parishads, Upazila RMP Cells, Union Parishads⁴ (UP) and elected Project Management Committees to plan, implement and monitor the Road Maintenance Component of RMP and other development projects at the local level
- To promote the participation of local women leaders in project decision making and operations management

1. For details on CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment and the empowerment model used, please see accompanying briefing note

2. Kanji, N. with B.Bode and A.Haq "Women's empowerment: perceptions, boundaries and strategies in Jalagari Village, NW Bangladesh", August 2005, Care Bangladesh.

3. RMP employed 42,000 women in each batch (10 women in each Union). Over the life of RMP over 166,000 women were employed through the program.

4. The Union Parishad is the governing body at union level (the lowest administrative unit of government). The Upazila is a subdistrict.



Strategy and Activities

RMP evolved from CARE's Food for Development Program (FFD), a food for work program which was essentially relief oriented. Women had been identified by the program as being particularly vulnerable to poverty. At the same time it was realized that roads being constructed under the Food for Development program needed ongoing maintenance. In 1983 a pilot was initiated within the program which brought these two issues together by employing destitute women as crew for road maintenance. Following the CARE pilot, RMP was funded by the Government of Bangladesh and the Government of Canada through Phase I (1985-1988), Phase II (1989-1995) and Phases III-1 and III-2 (1995-2001). Phase III-3 (2002-2006) was funded by the Government of Bangladesh, Government of Canada and European Community.

The objectives of the program gradually shifted in orientation from relief to development. It increasingly transformed its focus from just infrastructure development and maintenance to increasing women's earnings, socioeconomic status and food security. There were two major enhancements to the basic intervention model over the life of the program. The first involved the addition and subsequent refinement of life skills training for women employed in RMP beginning with a pilot program (Income Diversification Pilot Project IDPP) in 1992. The second was the addition, beginning in 1998, of capacity strengthening for local government institutions in preparation for handing over management of road maintenance activities to the Union Parishad. Thus, the project structure had developed three major components described in project literature in 2005 as:

- Road Maintenance Component (RMC): covering technical aspects of road maintenance management, employing destitute women and conducting skills training on road maintenance.
- Income Diversification Component (IDC): covering women's life skills training and counseling with strong focus on developing self-reliant business skills for managing sustainable income generation activities, enhancing understanding and ability to establish women's rights, health, reproductive health and money counting.
- Capacity Strengthening Component (CS): covering institutional strengthening of local government institutions with emphasis on planning, management, implementation and monitoring of the road maintenance part of RMP.

Over the life of RMP, the focal ministry for this project changed several times resulting in challenges in implementation. However, new legislation on local government in 1998 provided an opportunity to shift responsibility for road maintenance activities from LGED to the Local Government Division (LGD) with the Upazilla Parishad as the implementing agency beginning in 1999. This was significant in that it brought management of RMP road maintenance under the realm of the local government.

The project provided year round employment for destitute women, which was later accompanied by a mandatory savings plan and training in income diversification and business management. These components were included in order to provide a degree of sustainability of benefits to women after they graduated from the program. Women worked in groups of ten known as Road Maintenance Associations (RMA). Each association was responsible for maintaining 10 kilometers of rural earthen road. The women's daily wage was set based on a percentage of farm labor daily wage rate reported by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. As of March 2002, women were paid Tk. 43 per day, of which Tk. 10 was automatically transferred to a mandatory savings account.

From 1992 the income diversification component was organized in a four-year training cycle. The first two-year cycle focused on capacity building in technical skills like road-work, numeracy, human rights and gender, and the last second two-year cycle focused on Business Management and issues related to preparations for setting up and managing income generating activities. Skills building in specific income generating activities was not provided since there were too many possible activities. Rather, the program focused on basic training in business and management.

To ensure continuity of local government institutions' role in road maintenance, a Project Management Committee (PMC) was established that included women Union Parishad members. The Project Management Committee received a comprehensive training package on project management.

During the project period, two small pilots were also undertaken. The Self Help Groups for Women pilot primarily aimed to build a collective entity to encourage greater solidarity for the empowerment of RMP women. The other called Violence Prevention and Rights Reinforcement Cells tried to mobilize support to address issues of harassment and sexual assault by establishing cells at union level. Despite promising results the pilots could not be integrated into the core program due to differences in donor strategies.

Methods

The RMP impact inquiry was conducted in three districts, designed to include a cross-section of different social and cultural contexts across the country: Rangpur, Chittagong and Jessore. Staff members on the research team were asked to identify two unions where they would expect to find members who had graduated from Road Maintenance Associations, and whose lives would still show positive change. Therefore, two unions within each district were purposively selected using an appreciative inquiry approach, seeking to find unions where the inquiry could explore why and how women's lives had improved.

A range of methods were used for the study. First, focus group discussions with members of selected groups of graduated women were conducted to look at the changes that had occurred in their lives during and after their time in RMP. In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with members of the Union Parishad, including members of the oversight Project Management Committee to ask them about their role, the history of the program in their locality, their perception of changes that had taken place in the lives of the women, as well as changes that had taken place more broadly in the community.

Two types of individual interviews were conducted: The first type was with members of the graduated groups to explore their life histories and changes that had occurred during and after their involvement as Road Maintenance Association members. The second type of interview was conducted with Union Parishad and Project Management Committee members which focused on their involvement with the program, their views of changes in the lives of RMP women, and their perceptions of broader impacts of RMP. In order to undertake an analysis of wealth groups and changes in the lives of women who were not part of RMP, focus group discussions were held with additional groups of women in the communities. Interviews were also conducted with some men, and male and female children to find out how their lives had been affected by their mother's involvement in RMP.

An important aspect of the methodology of the impact study was the internal process used within the research team to reflect upon and analyze the principal findings themselves. This was done in two ways: first, by identifying what they thought were the major changes, and clustering these as change indicators in terms of agency, structure and relationship categories; and second, by asking staff to identify implications of the findings for CARE Bangladesh to improve its work on women's empowerment. As RMP was closing they were not asked to give specific recommendations for the program. From each research area a set of indicators from the findings was synthesized which have been compared across the three districts in the final report.



Context

A detailed context analysis was not done for the RMP study because of the extensive geographic expanse of the study sites as well as the vast implementation areas of the project. However, researchers made an attempt to compare general characteristics of the three field sites with the change indicators. The Chittagong area in the southeast was found to be comparatively conservative as compared to Rangpur. It is also the second largest financial center. It was found that Chittagong was permeated by a stronger emphasis on business than Rangpur, and people's economic condition in the Chittagong communities visited was better. Therefore, there was largely acceptance by men, of women becoming more mobile for business purposes. However, women's involvement in agricultural work outside their *paras*⁵ was still limited. The limited role of women in Union Parishads in the area suggested that there was clear demarcation of economic and political space. The third site, Jessore retained some of the liberal elements of Rangpur, but with a stronger emphasis on economic enterprise given its close proximity to the Indian border.



Impact Findings

The SII for RMP revealed most clearly the changes that take place in women's lives as a result of economic empowerment and how that affects social interactions and relationships. RMP's approach of linking destitute women with economic activity contributed greatly to enhancing women's self esteem and sense of dignity.

Agency and Women of Road Maintenance Associations

According to the women who participated in RMP, the most significant impact was in the broad category of economic and social change indicators. Positive changes in economic condition were evident from women and their dependents having three meals a day, better clothes, the ability to send their children to school, and better housing. The research concluded that in the economic sphere, RMP graduates had unambiguously and almost without exception become more capable and active "agents" in pursuing their basic needs and rights. These changes were highly valued by the women engaged in RMP even though in the wider context of empowerment these may be considered as a starting point for ultimately realizing women's empowerment.

On the two most important empowerment issues for women in Bangladesh⁶, **mobility and control over decision-making**, women reported both increased mobility and control over decision-making within their homes and family. However, both these notions were understood by the women themselves within the boundaries of socially and culturally acceptable norms that grant ultimate control to men. Women showed little evidence of conscious awareness or discomfort with these social norms and constraints. Their enhanced sense of dignity and self worth coupled with better economic condition may have pushed boundaries but did not achieve significant structural change beyond conventional norms and expectations of gender relations.

In relation to **family and household decision-making**, some women seemed to have established considerable freedom while some completely surrendered these rights. There was a sense that women considered changes regarding decision-making within the boundaries of certain social conventions. This raises questions of how programs aiming for women's empowerment can raise aspirations of participants. The RMP study also points out that achieving self-realization is often not enough to enhance real capacity to pursue and claim rights. Though the study showed evidence of improvement in self-realization of RMP women, the impact on women's capacity to claim rights was weaker and more diffuse. Where social and cultural norms and unequal power relations were challenged, it tended to be in the realm of economic achievement.

Changes in the lives of RMP Women:

- Improvement in livelihood security
- Improved social standing
- Increased likelihood of educating children
- Increased skills in communication and confidence in social interactions

5. *Para* Usually Refers to neighborhood or immediate community. A village can have more than one *Para*.

6. According to the formative study done at the start of the Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Perception of power and powerlessness

Social Relationships and Women of Road Maintenance Association

The RMP study presented a sketch of how women's increased agency shapes social relationships. Women who were engaged in Rural Maintenance Associations largely defined the changes in social relations by considering economic empowerment as the most important change from which other changes derived. They pointed out that improved income generating capabilities had improved their self-confidence and self-esteem, and contributed to increased **social respectability** in their interactions within their communities.

The study showed evidence that the network of relations of RMP women in their communities had expanded. Economic empowerment of course played a significant role in changing how these women were seen in the community. But at the same time knowledge and skills gained through the project provided a tangible benefit for others to have increased interaction with these women. Adding to all this, the experience of RMP women in dealing with NGOs, service providers, and Union Parishad officials made them “Women of the World” in their own context, who could be depended on for information, advice and support beyond the normal scope of the village. There were numerous examples of these women reaching out to other women in their communities, providing various kinds of assistance. This increased their value in the community, and also resulted in increased opportunities for developing more social relationships.

The experience of RMP helped the women take on roles as intermediaries for interactions and negotiations with political representatives and service providers. However, there is little evidence of collective action, and negligible effect on consciousness of interdependence, negotiation and coalition building habits. In short, it can be said that these women were empowered by changes in certain social relationships, which enabled the women to exercise agency in those particular relationships. It is interesting to note that in the analysis of neighbors' perceptions of the change in RMP women, positive changes in their economic status was reported while the change in social status was not reported. Non-RMP women also reported some of these changes in their own lives.

There was a mixed picture of RMP's impact on **social issues and community decision-making**. For example, while one area reported decrease in dowry another reported increased forms of the practice of dowry. Leadership of women within communities, according to the researchers, also did not improve even though many of the women played leadership role in NGO activities. Such findings present challenges in strategizing to address deep-rooted social issues as well the need of collaboration in the larger context of work related to women's empowerment.

The findings note that there was little evidence of the kind of collective action suggested by the sub dimensions of empowerment and indicators in the SII empowerment framework⁷ being used, and make a consistent and convincing plea for increasing collective action by women. In some ways since the project worked with a large number of women across Bangladesh, the lack of a collective mobilization strategy is interpreted as a gap. But surely the improvements RMP was able to facilitate in the social value for women, particularly widowed, divorced, and abandoned women, are by no means a small change.

Structure and Non RMA Women

It is difficult to attribute structural changes in the wider community to RMP, particularly because the program did not have a mandate for any sort of broader social change. Both RMA women and non RMA women, during the period of RMP implementation, experienced changes in employment patterns due to savings and credit schemes run by various NGOs. This was also complemented by increased mobility and other changes for women in rural Bangladesh such as increased awareness of health and hygiene, family planning and legal aid, more children (including girl children) being sent to school, and use of hospitals instead of “quack” doctors.

Changes in the wider community in which RMP contributed

Women are more likely to work outside

Increased mobility

Increased representation of women in Union Parishad and decision-making

Ways in which RMP women contributed

Leading by Example

Sharing knowledge

Providing direct encouragement, advice and support

7. For details on CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment and the empowerment model used, please see accompanying brief (Report 1)

During its life RMP contributed to the broader context of structural change for women's empowerment in at least two areas. It played a pioneering role for employment of women by being able to demonstrate that women are able to work outside their homes on roads. This was a critical factor in encouraging other women, as well as reducing family resistance, particularly of male guardians, to these changes. This contributed to broader social structural changes like increased market accessibility and women's access to information and services. RMP also contributed to women's representation at the level of local government by promoting women members of Union Parishad as Chairpersons in Program Management Committees, and bringing women onto the committee as members. It also engaged Union Parishad members in training that promoted inclusive decision-making and awareness of social issues such as dowry, early marriage and violence against women. In addition to facilitating improvements in decision-making processes within the Union Parishad by encouraging the participation and inclusion of women in decision-making, RMP was successful in improving management skills of the members to manage road maintenance programs.

There are indications in the study that RMP most strongly affected women in the 'poor and extremely poor' categories as most of the women in RMP were drawn from these classes. The program did have an impact on upper classes and social elites through its work with Union Parishad officials and Program Management Committees. The study suggests that RMP also contributed to reducing deeply engrained stigma and discrimination directed at widows and divorced or "abandoned" women, however, it recommends further research on this area of change.

Implications

The SII findings point to the importance of economic assets and their links to all three domains of women's empowerment. They also clearly point to RMP's limitations in addressing deeper issues embedded in social norms and patriarchal structures. However, what achievements were made, were at tremendous scale. The final report notes that though RMP may have cut a very thin slice through disempowering patriarchal structures in Bangladeshi villages, it cut that thin slice across 4,200 unions in 61 of 64 districts over a span of more than twenty years. The question this raises is: had RMP more directly challenged patriarchal and social norms and power structures, would it have been embraced so widely, endured so long, and encountered so little resistance? One cannot ignore the contribution of high visibility and sheer breadth of the impact.

An important lesson to draw from the study is that income, assets and savings are really important for empowerment, particularly for those at the bottom of the economic ladder. In designing an intervention for women's empowerment, serious consideration must be given to economic empowerment of women.

There are strategies which empower individual women but, by and large, do so within existing structural constraints, and there are programs which are explicitly directed towards conscientization of men and women for women's empowerment to address and alter structural constraints to directly seek political and social change. Evaluating strategies alone in terms of "good and better" or "superficial and deep" may not be the best option to move forward with an empowerment agenda. Rather, attempts should be made to build on the ripple effect of strategies already being employed to promote women's empowerment through various interventions or community efforts, and to look for strategic options to move forward the empowerment agenda in different ways in different cultural social and political contexts at different points in time. While the study points to RMP's contribution towards significant changes in the aspects of agency and social relations, collective actions by women could have made a deeper dent in achieving some structural changes and greater sustainability of impact.

Throughout the study there was a common tendency among those interviewed to attribute increased economic position with social status, which itself indicates the limited aspirations of women. This observation reiterates the need for more work in the areas of political representation, inclusiveness and equitable notions of citizenship for women. It was also pointed out that social skills such as the ability to talk, familiarity with Union Parishad, and links to service providers resulted in changed perceptions of the community members about destitute women. This of course highlights the need for development organizations to expand program strategies to build social skills for women.



In Conclusion

Towards the end of 2006, through a series of workshops and meetings, CARE Bangladesh facilitated a synthesis process to review the findings emerging from each of the SII studies, and to explore the implications of these findings for future work to promote women's empowerment. Feedback from project participants present at the SII Synthesis meeting held in Dhaka in September clearly indicated that, while there had been significant impact on the lives of women involved in CARE projects, what was needed was greater impact on institutions such as dowry, early marriage, women's security, women's leadership and cohesiveness of the women's movement. Reflections from synthesis work in Bangladesh and beyond provide some valuable recommendations and make a compelling case for critical programmatic and organizational change in order to achieve the impact we seek on women's empowerment. As women's empowerment is unfolded through a continuous process of reflection on the findings and recommendations emerging from SII studies, CARE Bangladesh gears itself to reshape its change agenda for women's empowerment.



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Reshaping the Change Agenda for Women's Empowerment

At a global synthesis meeting, participants from various SII research sites around the world shared their findings with each other to answer key questions in relation to the implications for CARE:

- What have we learned about **conceptualizing empowerment** and what new learning do we need to generate in the future?
- What **actual impacts** positive, absent, or negative (harms) are we convinced of in the sites where research was conducted?
- What **impact research methods** that we have we learned are most useful? What do we want to do differently in the future?
- What **changes in program practice and design** does our learning call for and how can we ensure they are understood and embedded in the organization?
- What **changes in organizational practices** do our learning calls for and how can we make sure they are understood and embedded into the organization?
- What **lessons/knowledge must be shared**, with which internal and external actors, and what knowledge products and sharing processes are most appropriate?

Reflections on some of these questions are available in the phase-II Global Synthesis Report entitled *The Courage to Change: Confronting the limits and unleashing the potential of CARE's programming for women*. Click on Women's Empowerment at the CARE Bangladesh site www.carebd.org.