



In Partnership with



The FSUP-H project is funded by the European Union.

Engaging Men Initiative

Background

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world where almost 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. Natural hazards combined with high levels of inequity and low institutional capacity further exacerbate poverty. The northeast of the country is particularly susceptible to flooding, as unique shallow depressions termed Haors, trap annual flood water for up to eight months of the year. Geographical and social isolation along with annual flooding leave the population vulnerable. The harsh environment of the northeast results in a conservative population with deeply entrenched gender inequalities which leave women marginalised.

CARE's long history of programming in Bangladesh has resulted in an in depth understanding of the underlying causes of poverty. CARE's work has shown that extreme poverty and gender discrimination are inextricably linked. With this in mind, women's empowerment is at the heart of CARE Bangladesh's work. In response to extreme poverty in the Haor region CARE developed the Food Security for the Ultra-Poor (FSUP-H) project (2009-2013) which is funded by the European Union. The FSUP-H project is working for increased inclusion and capacity of 55,000 extremely poor women for economic empowerment and food security. FSUP-H's women's empowerment approach places women at the centre, without strategically focusing on the engagement of men and boys.

To achieve FSUP-H's goal in overcoming food insecurity for 55,000 extremely poor families in the northeast, deep rooted gender inequalities have to be addressed, which requires involving both women and men in the development process. In recognition of this, CARE developed the Engaging Men Initiative (EMI), funded by CARE Norway, to strengthen and build on FSUP's women's empowerment work. EMI uses FSUP as a platform to work with men and boys as well as women to challenge conventional gender norms and promote more equitable relationships among men and women. This approach, in combination with economic empowerment and increased inclusion of women in social and political processes, will ultimately lead to improved food security and a better quality of life for all.

Objective

CARE and its partners have learnt from experience that women's empowerment can only be sustained through broader changes in the social and institutional environment, which includes changing men's attitude both at home and in the institutions they dominate. With this in mind, the Engaging Men Initiative has an overall objective to promote gender equality where women will find an enabling environment to improve their human condition and social position. To achieve this EMI will specifically aim to;

1. Bring changes in gender norms and practices where men are supportive of women's empowerment and taking increased participation in household share and care giving.
2. Transform local institutional processes to address the power imbalance between men and women where men will act equally as drivers of economic, social and political change.



Community Led Development

Providing a platform to give the poorest families, in particular women, a voice in their communities is a key part of the project's approach. CARE has established Empowerment, Knowledge and Transformative Action (EKATA) groups in 450 communities across the northeast. The EKATA groups focus on women's empowerment and provide a forum for women to discuss important issues around their rights and gender discrimination issues. The strength of these groups is in their collective ability to contribute to conflict resolution around issues including domestic violence, sexual harassment and early marriage. The women are encouraged to share their increased awareness with their male family members and through targeted sessions, men and boys discuss issues such as sharing of household work, violence against women and family health jointly with the women.

CARE and its partners have also established 645 Village Development Committees (VDC) which consist of extremely poor women and specially identified pro-poor men. The committees act as a development platform for the poor, and identify problems in the community and realistic solutions. The VDCs are also supported to establish a dialogue with the local government to ensure the poorest families, particularly women, receive the services they are entitled to.

Household level change

The EMI project is working with both women and men to encourage a change in the behaviour and attitude of men at the household level. CARE has provided cash grants to women to establish a small business and the EMI project is working with the women and their husbands to encourage mutual support in these activities. Additionally, the project has helped to establish savings and loans groups, where women can take charge of family savings. Men and women then make joint decisions on how to utilise their savings. The women's increased economic empowerment encourages men to include women in important economic household decisions such as expenditure on children's education.

EKATA groups are equipping the poorest women with the confidence to speak out about gender discrimination and share these issues at home. Natural leaders have been identified by the project and are being encouraged to lead by example and make a stand in their communities against negative gender norms.

Institutional Change

The natural leaders and some of the poorest women, with new found confidence, are being encouraged to run for election on local committees. The project is also assisting the most confident women to run for local government election so they can speak out with authority on discrimination against women. The EMI project is working with local institutions such as the local health department to bring about institutional change, where both women and men receive the equitable support they are entitled to. Furthermore, the project targets the private sector to recognise women as viable economic partners who require equal wages. EMI supports project participants to attend meetings with these local institutions and provides an opportunity for the women to demand more accountability from the institutions.

Long Term Change

The VDCs and EKATAs have created a space for socially and economically excluded ultra poor women and men. The women in particular have become an integral part of the community development processes (VDCs), with higher levels of awareness and information on their rights (EKATA groups), increased savings (savings group) and improved livelihood opportunities. The behaviour of men in many of the communities where the project is working is beginning to change. Both men and women in the communities are reporting an increase in women's mobility, allowing women to access services and markets for the first time. With an increase in economic empowerment, project participants are reporting joint decision making in the home. The project has established many links with committees and groups previously always dominated by men. As the VDC and EKATA groups continue to grow in strength it is hoped more women will actively participate as equal members on these committees in the years to come.

Wider Impact

Engaging men and boys is central to the women's empowerment programming that runs through the heart of all CARE Bangladesh's work. Drawing on CARE's previous experience of women's empowerment the EMI is helping to deepen understanding on engaging men and boys for women's empowerment. EMI is providing CARE and its partner staff with reflective space to consider how their behaviour and attitude not only impacts on their personal lives but also on the extremely poor women, men, girls and boys who's lives they seek to influence. The institutional knowledge and understanding that this builds will contribute to CARE's long-term women's empowerment programming for many years to come.

