

The Daily Star

BRAC's steadfast endeavour to break the gender divide

Maheen Sultan

Fri Apr 2, 2021

In Bangladesh, women community health workers played a pioneering role in bringing rural women to outside formal employment. Source: BRAC Facebook page
BRAC's journey is almost as long as Bangladesh's. It celebrated the 49 years of its founding on March 21, 2021. As a development worker and women's rights activist, I would like to reflect on BRAC's journey and its contribution to the national development and gender equality on the occasion of Bangladesh's 50th anniversary. Looking back, the symbiotic relationship between BRAC and Bangladesh is clear: the successes of BRAC and Bangladesh have been interdependent, and addressing the future challenges will also require more strategic partnership and synergy. BRAC has, through its work, contributed to some major changes towards equality.

BRAC's founding in Sulla, Sunamganj and the ways in which its initiatives and programmes helped it evolve from its humble beginnings into the biggest NGO in the world—working across multiple countries and multiple sectors, giving birth to many social enterprises and even a university—are part of history. I would like to highlight a few examples that show BRAC's innovativeness and ability to scale up, which enabled it to deliver solutions to large numbers of the people. One of the aspects that stands out is that BRAC was able to try out an approach and quickly take it to scale.

For example, the nationwide campaign to make homemade oral rehydration solution for the treatment of diarrhoea was able to provide a simple and affordable solution that contributed to the saving of lives of young and old through the "*ek chimti lobon, ek mutha gur, aar ek sher pani*" concoction. This was something any mother, or other members of a family, could do for their children and save their lives.

A non-formal primary education school model was developed under which a locally educated person was employed as a teacher, children who were school dropouts were brought in, a ratio was set of having more girls than boys, and the children were taught until they were ready to enter a government school at the 6th grade level. Not only did BRAC implement this model on its own but it was also able to

train numerous local NGOs to run such schools for which BRAC would provide the materials, training and resources. This helped establish the importance of girls' education and bring dropouts back to school. Thanks to the expansion of government primary school coverage, BRAC was able to step back from this essential role of ensuring girls' education at the primary level. BRAC's focus is now on pre-primary and early childhood development interventions.

BRAC staff have been role models for rural boys and girls as well as their families. The sight of BRAC women staff riding on their bicycles or on 50 CC motorbikes on the rural roads contributed to a rethinking of the role of women and their mobility. They became the symbols of what young women could aspire to be—to have careers, mobility and an independent status in the family.

While BRAC has an impressive number of staffers, it also has a sizeable cadre of volunteers. These include community health workers, all of whom are women. BRAC health workers draw considerable support from the wide range of development programmes that BRAC is involved in. It employs two categories of community health workers: Shasthya Shebikas, who are volunteers (but also supported as health entrepreneurs), and Shasthya Kormis, who are paid a minimal salary and are supported by SSs whose work they have to supervise. Not only did they take primary health care door to door, thereby transforming the lives of the people they provided services to, they also transformed their own lives and the family and social relations that they were part of.

In Bangladesh, family planning and health programmes were the first major employers of rural women in terms of outside paid work. Women community health workers became the pioneers in bringing rural women to outside formal employment in a social/economic context that would not only discourage women's participation in outside paid work but also actively restrict their mobility in the public sphere.

Another very innovative programme that addressed gender inequalities was the Adolescent Development Programme, through which "kishori clubs" were set up all over the country. Although the aim was to support adolescent girls by providing them reproductive health education, confidence building and helping to keep them in school instead of getting married early, the programme also brought in a small number of adolescent boys so that they would not feel excluded, and also so that boys and girls could relate to each other in a natural environment and develop healthy social relationships. This also contributed to challenging the discriminatory social norms and practices while working with the adolescents. This programme has since been taken up by the government.

Yet another innovative programme was the Gender Quality Action Learning (GQAL) programme. In 1995, the GQAL programme was launched to improve staff relations, the quality of BRAC programmes, and also the quality of the life of VO members—the village-level organisation formed by female BRAC programme participants. At the same time, gender training was introduced for all BRAC staff with the aim of establishing a just environment within the organisation by making them aware of what constitutes as a gender-equitable environment. Various external evaluations of GQAL found that it contributed to a significant degree in

bringing about a positive change in villagers' perceptions with respect to gender relations of power, control and status.

Not only has BRAC learned and evolved during its long journey, other development programmes and organisations—both governmental and non-governmental—have also learned from and with BRAC. BRAC and its founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed always thought that Bangladesh has not made enough progress in gender equality, and there are second-generation challenges that need to be tackled. He wanted BRAC to do more, and be more creative and cleverer in accelerating and consolidating progress in tackling gender inequalities. As Bangladesh celebrates its 50 years and BRAC proceeds to do the same in one year, this is the challenge that calls for a rejuvenated pledge and plan of action.

Maheen Sultan is a Senior Fellow of Practice at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development.