



## Women's Participation in the Dairy Value Chain in Bangladesh

Even though women are significant contributors to agriculture in Bangladesh, their contributions are invisible and their role in homestead based agriculture is usually ignored. Women's participation in agriculture has always been under-recognized. Key problems that women face include the lack of or limited right to own or control land, limited access to loans and credit services, limited or no access to extension services and limited access to markets. In Bangladesh, a history of patriarchy and women's seclusion intensify these problems.

### Key challenges faced by women in agricultural and dairy value chain activities

- Women's mobility is limited because of traditional patriarchal attitudes and therefore women are secluded to the home. They are limited in their role in the dairy value chain, working mainly as producers. Women cannot expand their businesses since they do not have marketing opportunities
- Women can own productive assets such as livestock and poultry if they are bought with their own money or received as gifts from their parents. However, they may or may not have decision-making power over these assets.
- Women are responsible for the care of livestock and dairy production, however there are no formal livestock property rights in Bangladesh and women owning cattle can still be at a disadvantage when ownership of cattle is challenged.
- Women's large workload impedes on their ability to participate in other Income Generating Activities.
- Traditional attitudes of dairy producers are predominantly distrustful of female service providers because they feel women cannot skillfully conduct technical work such as LHW and AI, as men would be able to do.

Cattle rearing and dairy farming is traditionally considered a part of housework for which women are responsible, while the men take charge of the external activities concerning procurement of inputs and sales of milk or cattle in the market. With regards to the Bangladesh dairy value chain, the women's role is usually limited to producers based in the homesteads. All the other value chain actors such as milk collectors, livestock health workers (LHWs) and artificial inseminators (AIs) are usually men. These occupations are considered traditionally inappropriate for women since they require movement outside the household and interaction with outsiders.

Due to cultural norms that favour women's seclusion and undervalue women's work -their contributions to agricultural production are mostly unrecognized.

Dairy farming is a traditional occupation of rural households in Bangladesh and women in particular are involved in production, predominantly at the homestead level. As such, working with female dairy producers directly at the household level is a feasible pathway to increasing engagement of women in a socio-economic activity, increasing their independent income and contributing to improving their status within the household and in the community. It is important to note that the overall dairy farming industry in Bangladesh, particularly in the North and North-West, suffers from poor cattle breeds,

low milk yields, inadequate infrastructure and a complex array of challenges in the input supply and services market for poor smallholders and in marketing the milk produced by these households.

In the beginning, getting women involved in activities that require them to extend their dealings beyond the household and to interact with a range of outsiders (particularly men who are not family members) such as other value chain actors i.e. LHWs, collectors, collection points, input dealers, livestock services providers, proved to be a challenge for the project.

Women have limited mobility for a variety of reasons, the main being that they need permission from their husband or the male guardian of the household to go to public spaces such as meetings and the market. Women are also burdened with heavy housework responsibilities, which is a major limiting factor. Though women are actively involved in cattle rearing, they have limited decision-making abilities, especially when it comes to marketing and income control.

### CARE Bangladesh's Activities – the SDVC project

To tackle the problems in the dairy value chain, CARE Bangladesh, with funding support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, implemented the Strengthening the Dairy Value Chain Project (SDVCP) in 9 districts in the Northwestern Bangladesh from October 2007 to December 2012. The project aimed to increase the income of 35,000 targeted smallholder and landless milk-producing households, and to create employment opportunities for extremely poor households—especially for the women in those households—through various activities along the dairy value chain.

The SDVC project took every stage of the value chain into consideration. The project mobilized smallholders into producer groups and gave them training on livestock health, the benefits of cross-breed cows and the use of artificial insemination, feeding practices and financial management. The project enabled access to quality inputs such as feed and medicine by linking the producers to service providers i.e. veterinarians, livestock health workers, feed sellers and artificial inseminators. To ensure that producers will be able to access fair prices and proper sale outlets for the milk they produced, the producers were educated about opportunities in the different formal and informal markets and the price ranges they could expect to receive for their milk. Producers were encouraged to sell milk through a collective process so that the larger quantities would attract larger buyers, especially the formal milk processing companies. Milk collectors were also

Specific objectives of SDVCP were to:

1. Improve milk collection systems in rural and remote areas;
2. Improve access to inputs, markets, and services by mobilizing groups of poor farmers, producers, and chardwellers;
3. Improve the artificial insemination (AI) network;
4. Ensure access to quality service at the producer level; and
5. Improve the policy environment in the dairy sector.

### Achievements

In addition to training the existing population of female dairy producers, the project has successfully involved women in non-traditional roles in the dairy value chain that were typically occupied by men.

SDVCP has done a remarkable job in engaging many smallholder female dairy producers more formally in the dairy value chain, linking them with input dealers and livestock health services, organizing them into groups and linking them with trained milk collectors, chilling plants and the formal milk sector. The project has been successful in allowing women to take on different roles in the value chain other than producers.

Over the project period, the challenges faced by women participating in the dairy value chain were assessed and the project strived to address them through individual and group discussions with family members and community people, particularly with household heads. These discussions have enabled the community people and family members to better understand women's rights, abilities, the roles women can play in the dairy value chain, and therefore increased support for women as farmer leaders, LHWs, AIs and milk collectors.

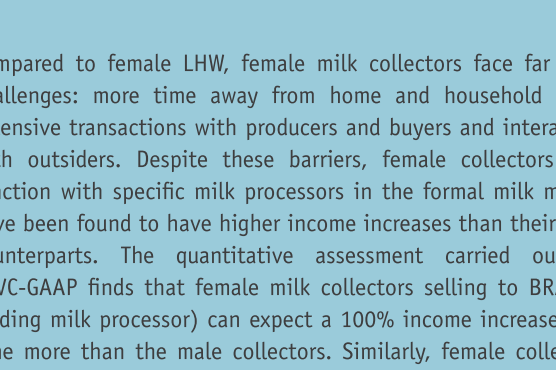
Over the 5-year project period, SDVCP increased the capacity and capability of female producers, farmer group leaders, livestock health workers, milk collectors, AI workers and input suppliers.

The project trained and established 150 agricultural input shops, 31 of which are run by women. Most of these women operate their businesses from home and serve the dairy farmers in their village. Through FGDs and interviews, women have expressed how the opportunity to run their own shop has changed their lives, not only because they have a reliable source of income but also because this financial independence has given them an increased sense of confidence and status in their family and community (Case Study – Shefali Parvin).

In striving to engage women in non-traditional dairy-related activities, the project worked with the local community and government livestock services department to select and support potential women as LHWs and AIWs. Based on women's needs assessments, capacity building packages were offered for the women, which included intensive hands-on training by agriculture and livestock institutions such as the Bangladesh Agriculture University and Hajj Mohammad Danesh Science and Technology University. After being trained, the women were linked with other value chain actors that worked to support their new professions, e.g. the Department of Livestock Services, pharmaceutical companies, semen suppliers, milk buyers and other dairy producers. The project developed and tested tools and processes to sensitize men and the local people where the project-trained women worked so that women could overcome social and traditional attitudes and pursue their professions profitably.

Shefali Parvin – Increasing income, confidence and respect  
Parbatipur, Dinajpur District, NW Bangladesh

Shefali Parvin (42) lives with her husband and two daughters. To address her family's hardships, she joined CARE's SDVC project as a producer and later became a cattle feed seller. With support and training from CARE and in consultation with her husband, Shefali started cattle feed business with an investment of USD 22 from milk sales. She started selling 50 kg of feed per month at USD 0.19 /kg and now sells up to 175 kg of feed per month earning about USD 36 a month. This is a considerable contribution from Shefali to the household income and her relationship with her husband has improved since he started to value her more as a person. Shefali has also gained considerable respect for the members of her community. Most of her group members buy feed from her and consult with her about their cattle feed amounts. Some even discuss family matters with her. Shefali recounts that "My family members are all truly proud of what I have achieved and they now believe that there is much more I can further achieve".

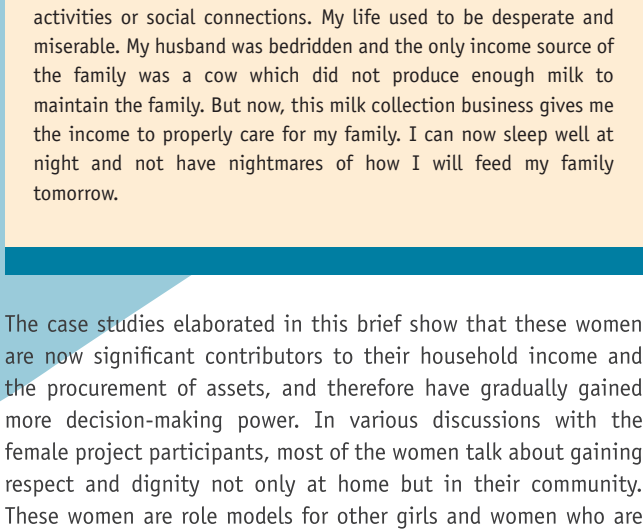


Shefali hopes to get a feed dealership license so that she can establish herself further as a major feed seller in her village and nearby villages. Shefali says that since making quality feed available in her area, dairy cattle are properly cared for and milk production in her village has increased; therefore it is contributing to improving not only Shefali's economical situation but also of the other villagers.

The project's mid-term study found that LHW women were fairly successful and most were well accepted in their communities. Female producers feel more comfortable talking to a female service provider and therefore female LHWs gain easy access to producer households. The SDVC-GAAP research initiative conducted qualitative studies in the later years of the project and found that female LHWs have a fairly positive position within their households and communities. An analysis of the income trends of LHWs shows that over the project period, female LHWs seem to have experience fairly higher income increase than their male counterparts. For example, a female LHW with basic training received a 33% higher income increase than men. Women with advanced training and those with both basic and advanced training have a 22% and 17% increase in income, respectively, than their male counterparts (Fig 1).

The average income of female LHWs has increased from \$19 to \$110 per month (Jan 2009 to August 2012) (Fig 1). This increase in income may not seem substantial in comparison to the male counterparts which increased by from \$53 to \$275 per month (Jan 2009 to August 2012), but considering the rural context and barriers faced by the women, it can be considered an achievement. Since the clientele of female LHWs is limited to SDVC producers, they have a consistently lower income than the male LHWs who serve a wider population of SDVC and non-SDVC farmers. Also the female LHWs first entered this profession under the project while many of the male LHWs were already locally established.

Figure 1: Trend of LHW's Income from Jan 2009 to Aug 2012  
Source: SDVC's GPF and LHW Survey data



Compared to female LHW, female milk collectors face far more challenges: more time away from home and household work, extensive transactions with producers and buyers and interaction with outsiders. Despite these barriers, female collectors that function with specific milk processors in the formal milk market have been found to have higher income increases than their male counterparts. The quantitative assessment carried out by SDVC-GAAP finds that female milk collectors selling to BRAC (a leading milk processor) can expect a 100% income increase over time more than the male collectors. Similarly, female collectors can expect an 80% increase in income from Akij and 30% from GrameenDanone (other milk processing companies). In the informal market women's increase in income was 10% lower than that of men, since this is a male-dominated public arena requiring a lot of aggressive negotiations.

Daulotunnessa – Milk Collector – finally rid of the nightmares of a hungry tomorrow

After living in desperation for many years with a bed-ridden husband and three children, Daulotunnessa (37) finally felt that she had regained her dignity after becoming a milk collector. Before her husband became paralyzed, Daulotunnessa and her husband, Kasheem Miah (50) who was a farmer, led a fairly decent life. After Kasheem became paralyzed the only source of income was a local breed cow that gave very poor milk yields. The family's income depended on Daulotunnessa. In an attempt to improve livestock care and increase the production of the cow she owned, she joined an SDVCP producer group. Unfortunately, the producers in Daulotunnessa's producer group faced a problem of selling milk since the main milk market was far from their villages. Daulotunnessa took the responsibility as a milk collector to transport and sell the milk in the market. She received training as a milk collector. She bought the milk at Tk 35 (0.45)/liter and sold in the market for Tk. 38-40 (USD 0.49-0.52) per liter. She was happy to start earning small amounts and to provide for her family.



Daulotunnessa describes her life: I was a conventional village woman and had limited access to go out of the home to attend activities or social connections. My life used to be desperate and miserable. My husband was bedridden and the only income source of the family was a cow which did not produce enough milk to maintain the family. But now, this milk collection business gives me the income to properly care for my family. I can now sleep well at night and not have nightmares of how I will feed my family tomorrow.

The case studies elaborated in this brief show that these women are now significant contributors to their household income and the procurement of assets, and therefore have gradually gained more decision-making power. In various discussions with the female project participants, most of the women talk about gaining respect and dignity not only at home but in their community. These women are role models for other girls and women who are struggling with poverty and their rightful position in society.

Overall, whatever challenges the women have faced in taking on new professions in the dairy value chain, with project support they have overcome them and are continuing with their professions. As producers, women are fully involved and active and it is from first participating in the project as producers that some women progressed to pursue the other value chain professions. The producer groups provide a forum where female producers meet. The other female professionals also meet sometimes at these forums. When in a group with other women, they tend to communicate and share their problems, which leads to building their confidence, learning negotiation skills and taking progressive steps to improve their livelihoods.

The SDVC-GAAP research assessed the impacts the project has had on indicators such as asset portfolios, household dynamics, and gender norms and finds that the dairy value chain has the potential to act as a catalyst for positive social change in rural areas. The project has developed tools to sensitize and educate women and men together so that the women can be supported to pursue other professions if they find it within their means.

### Continued challenges

The main challenges faced by women have to do with their load of household work, the persistent norm of secluding women to the household by both the family and the community and the reluctance of male professionals to work with women.

While the project has been able to take the first steps in introducing alternative professions for women in the dairy value chain, challenges remain in popularizing these professions among women and making these acceptable to the wider community and enabling women to work on par with men. Sensitizing male professionals to accept working alongside women will require a considerable amount of effort since Bangladeshi society is ingrained with traditional patriarchal attitudes. The main problems women face have to do with balancing their household work with that of their profession, receiving consent from the male guardian of their family and receiving the support of their community.

### Looking ahead

Based on the experience from the first phase of the project, CARE is expanding the SDVC program to major milk producing zones and this program has special focus on empowering women and involving them in the dairy value chain activities as much as possible. This is based on the premises that:

- Increasing women's participation in the dairy value chain increases their income and savings, their ability to procure assets, mobility and contributes to positively changing their decision-making status within the household.
- Increasing women's participation in a structured manner improves their skills and the recognition of their contribution to dairy production, thus enhancing the respect they receive in the household and the community.
- Women's participation in the dairy value chain has increased their mobility and access to inputs and milk markets, however continuation of gender campaign activities is needed to take this forward.
- Increasing men's support for women's roles in dairy value chain activities. Without men's support and a positive change in their attitude, collective progress of women will be hampered.

The project has demonstrated that by sensitizing the dairy community, challenges faced by women in their mobility can be reduced, allowing them to go outside their communities to purchase inputs or to sell milk, to work in roles other than dairy producers and to have access to income while participating in HH decision-making.

To learn more about our work, see resources at <http://www.carebangladesh.org>

SDVC Project Summary  
Innovation Briefs  
Building Trust, Accountability and Performance: The Bangladesh Participatory Performance Tracking Matrix

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