

Mothers' Clubs --- "Fencing Out" Disability

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Background

Since 1993, IMPACT Foundation Bangladesh (IFB) has been relentlessly working to improve the quality of life of the rural poor of Bangladesh by preventing and curing disability through education and awareness, training and social mobilization, and primary health care and curative medical services. IFB's flagship programs have been the mobile Floating Hospital "Jibon Tari" and the Comprehensive Primary Health Care and Education Programs in Chuadanga and Meherpur districts situated in the Southwest of Bangladesh.

IMPACT Foundation Bangladesh initiated the Mothers Club program in Chuadanga and Meherpur district, as it was perceived to be an effective way to disseminate information about prevention and easy correction of disability to the local communities. This is due to the major role that women play within the household and community. These include caring for family members, young and old, nearly all homestead production, preparation and distribution of food, collection of firewood and water and an infinite number of other activities within the household. The Mothers Club initiative has three major activities Health education, Nutrition education and a Home Gardening program allowing women to grow vegetables for consumption in their families and for sale.

26,000 rural poor women of Chuadanga and Meherpur districts are grouped under 1,200 Mothers' Clubs. Rural mothers, who are poor and divorced, widowed, pregnant and lactating, and having land holding below 66 decimals are encouraged to form Mothers' Clubs. On an average, 18-22 women form a Mothers' Club. These rural poor women understand that they meet and work as a group so that disability is "fenced out" from them and their families and the Bangla term they use for this is "Protibondhitar goray bera deoa".

Mothers' club is a center for rural mothers to get together. It is also be a learning center, where all members meet once every month. They learn about health, environment, agriculture, income generating activities, nutrition and disability etc, from here. It creates a social network and bonds these women with dignity and harmony.

Objectives of Mothers Club:

- To create awareness among rural women on disability, its types, causes and prevention and also create awareness about the role of family and society towards persons with disability.
- To increase awareness among mothers' club member on importance of nutrition, different type of nutrient in food, balanced diet, process of preparing balanced food, vitamin rich food, diseases related to malnourishment and necessity of nutritious food and vitamin to prevent disability.
- To increase awareness on diseases and health conditions causing disability and also about ways to prevent and mitigate such disabilities.
- To develop awareness on importance of primary health care, pre and post natal care, childcare, vaccination, communicable & non-communicable diseases and its prevention.
- To increase awareness on maltreatment of persons with disability, which are based on prejudices, and to reduce such practices.

- To provide a comprehensive perception to mothers' club members on value of home garden as a source of regular supply of vitamin that promotes health and prevents disability; and to assist the members to develop skill on growing vegetables in their homestead.

Mothers Club Formation and Management:

Field Worker of Impact Foundation Bangladesh discusses the importance of mothers' club with interested rural women. These discussions are also motivational sessions for the poor women to improve their life and livelihood. After a series of discussion, Mothers' Clubs are formed with, on an average, 18-22 motivated and interested women who come from the same neighborhood.

For proper supervision and direction of the Mother's Club activities each club elects a chairman and a secretary from among the members in a democratic manner, while all others remain as general members of the club.

The chair and the secretary direct and conduct all activities of mothers club with assistance from other members and support from IFB's field workers. Under their leadership, activities like monthly meeting, health education session, nutrition training, growing home garden, etc. are implemented. IFB field worker communicates with the chair and secretary about various activities and they in turn take the responsibility to communicate those to all other members.

Activity of Mothers Club:

Impact Foundation Bangladesh implements different activities through mothers club to improve primary health care services and prevent disability:

- **Mothers Club Meeting:**

Mothers Club's members meet once in a month in a prearranged place for about two hours. They discuss and document important issues in the meeting such as when pregnant mothers of their families had gone for checks up, if they have received folic acid and TT vaccine, if vitamin A capsule were provided to postnatal mothers etc. Immunization of the children of members is ensured. The chairman or secretary of mothers' club takes initiative to ensure the above mentioned health care services from Impact Foundation.

- **Health Education Session:**

The mother's club leaders organize health education session to increase awareness on health seeking behaviors and its exercise among the members. Field Worker of Impact Foundation conducts health education session in conjunction with Mothers' Club meetings. Chair and secretary of mothers club monitor and observe whether members use and exercise the skill and knowledge they gained from health education session in their daily life.

- **Home garden:**

A significant activity of mothers club constitutes growing micronutrient rich vegetables in the homesteads of the members. The members use knowledge and skill received through different training to develop vegetables gardens. The IFB field worker provides active support with advice and technical assistance. IFB also provides support by providing seeds and seedlings and fencing material for developing the home gardens.

- **Promoting use of hygienic latrine and tube well:**

Another important activity of mothers club is to provide motivation to members so that they use sanitary latrine and drink water from arsenic free tube well. The importance of safe water and sanitation for prevention of disability are repeatedly mentioned through education sessions. Many families motivated through this practical education have already built sanitary latrines and are pursuing other good health practices.

- **Disability identification and prevention:**

Various training activities are organized for the members to create awareness on early identification and prevention of disability. These include training on eye care and cataract detection, signs of disability among newborn and infants etc. A referral system is in place through which the mothers' club members can send their family members and also other poor people of their communities to seek the health services from IFB hospitals in Chuadanga and Meherpur.

Impact on rural families and communities:

Mothers club contribute positively in different health issues to build healthy families in Chuadanga and Meherpur.

- Mothers clubs work as "resource centers" for poor rural women.
- Members of mothers club have become aware of society, environment, primary health care, food and nutrition, communicable diseases, diseases related with nutrition deficiency and how all of these have a relationship to disability.
- Members became aware on importance of nutrition, balance diet, personal hygiene etc. to prevent disability.
- Mothers understand the necessity of fresh micronutrient rich vegetables and many of them develop home-garden in their homestead. The home gardens ensure regular supply of vegetables to meet nutrition requirement of their families. It also brings additional income through sale of excess vegetables.
- Mothers learn about the importance of sanitary latrine and most of them have built sanitary latrine in their home after becoming members of Mothers' clubs.
- Member of mothers club use arsenic free water for drinking and cooking purposes.
- Rural poor women know about superstitions existing in the society in relation to pregnant and lactating mother's care and food habits. They understand the need for additional nutrition for pregnant mothers.
- Pregnant mothers became aware of the importance of regular checkup, folic acid supplementation and TT vaccine. They also know why postnatal mothers should take vitamin A. They are practicing these since becoming members of mothers' clubs.
- Following the footsteps of members of mothers' club, their neighbors have started to develop home garden in their homestead, installed tube wells and sanitary latrine.
- The Mothers' Club members help in identifying patients with disabilities. They referred a good number of patients who received corrective surgical treatment in IFB's hospitals. The mothers' club builds a bridge between patients and Impact's hospitals.
- The villagers consult the Mothers' Club members to know about health related problems. By and large, Mothers' Clubs work as non-formal education centers.

Conclusion

The commitments to improve the quality of life and enthusiasms of the poor rural women have sustained the Mothers' Clubs which were formed six years ago. The clubs continue to thrive as the mothers are committed to "fence out" disability from their families. Least in the list of achievements is that words like "Protibondhita" and "Protirodh", meaning 'Disability' and 'Prevention', rather difficult words of Sanskrit origin, are commonly used and understood by 26,000 poorest, illiterate women of Chuadanga and Meherpur districts.