

Analyzing the Effectiveness of Access to Information (a2i) Program in Promoting Women Empowerment in Selected Areas of Bangladesh: A Case Study of Shimulia Union Parishad and Muksudpur Union Parishad, Dhaka District

Ruhun Wasata*

Abstract

Access to Information (a2i) is a Government led nationwide program with 4,547 Union Digital Centers (UDCs) at every Union with two (one female and one male) entrepreneurs. With the aim of investigating to what extent 'a2i' is effective in promoting women empowerment through women entrepreneurship, this paper analyzed primary data collected from Shimulia Union Parishad (UP) and Muksudpur UP, Dhaka, Bangladesh. This paper indicates that the socioeconomic barriers are causing a2i program to have a less profound impact on promoting women empowerment through women entrepreneurship. With different recommendations from program level and policy level, this paper proposes that the design, redesign, and implementation of the a2i program should have a flexible characteristic so that it can address the socioeconomic challenges from within the scope of the program.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Women Entrepreneurship, a2i Program, Barriers to Women Entrepreneurs.

1. Introduction

Access to Information (a2i) is a program conducted in Bangladesh in a partnership between the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The program seeks to promote increased access to services and information by establishing e-service delivery centers – Union Digital Centers (UDC) in every Union Parishad (UP) (the lowest tier of local government). With an average distance of 3 Km, there are a total of 4,547 UDCs out of a total of 4,554 Ups. The establishment of UDCs under the a2i program is a unique initiative and remarkable progress for achieving digital Bangladesh as these centers provide information and services to the people of UP.

* Senior Lecturer (On study leave), Department of Social Relations, East West University, Bangladesh; Ph.D. Student, Health Behavior, Applied Health Science, School of Public Health, Indiana University Bloomington. Email: ruhun.wasata@ewubd.edu; rwasata@iu.edu.

Altogether around 40 different types of services are provided by UDCs. A male and a female entrepreneurs manage all the UDCs. Recruiting women entrepreneurs at the UDCs created possibilities for reducing gender inequality at local government. Entrepreneurs receive training from the GoB before taking over the charges at the UDCs. One important thing worth mentioning here is that the definition of entrepreneurs in the UDCs differs from the traditional entrepreneurs who take different creative initiatives. Instead, these entrepreneurs are generally recruited and supported by the GoB. The entire infrastructure of the UDCs is provided by the GoB and entrepreneurs are recruited there for managing the systems and providing services for the people on behalf of the GoB. The nuance of entrepreneurs, hence, is different from the conventional understandings of entrepreneurship.

In recognition of the success of a2i, the GoB and a2i program have received multiple awards and honors around the world. Both a2i and UDC and their implications in different sectors of Bangladesh have been serving as an area of research and analysis in academia. Nevertheless, despite a2i and the UDCs both having been researched extensively, available studies have not taken into consideration the aspect of women entrepreneurship and their empowerment under the a2i program. In various facets, a2i is indeed calling forth great results; however, to what extent is it promoting women empowerment through women entrepreneurship? The research on which this paper is based on aims to find out to what extent the a2i program is successful in promoting women empowerment via women entrepreneurship. This paper discusses the qualitative findings of a mixed-methods research funded by East West University Center for Research and Training (EWUCRT).

The research-question this paper gives the answer to is:

“Whether and to what extent is the a2i program contributing to women empowerment for developing women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh?”

EWUCRT already published an extensive report of the completed research. This paper aims to present the qualitative findings of the study along with future policy recommendation and further research possibilities. a2i as a program created opportunities for women to engage in entrepreneurial activities at the local government level. This research is useful to enhance understanding of how institutions and programs such as a2i can generate technology-based women employment opportunities, and barriers women experience for providing service at the local government.

This research has great potential for future research possibilities. This research provides an opportunity to perform longitudinal studies in these two research sites in the future. Furthermore, these two samples can be used as reference points for other UDCs' performance towards empowering women entrepreneurs.

2. Rationale

With the advent of an increasing need for entrepreneurship for economic development, it is understood that women's entrepreneurship can be beneficial for changing women's deprived socioeconomic situations in a patriarchal country such as Bangladesh (Carter & Weeks, 2002). a2i is attracting scholars of different spectrums to research and analyze its different achievements, but to date, no research has looked into the effectiveness of a2i as a program for women empowerment. The effectiveness of a2i to promote women empowerment should be looked into with immense importance.

Since incorporating a2i in the field of academic research is a new dimension, it is a challenging one. This research in turn can create new possibilities for academic research as well as realistic potentials for stimulating women entrepreneurship. This research asks whether or not the a2i program is impacting the lives of women entrepreneurs in UDC, family members' lives, and the larger community. To understand the power relations of the women entrepreneurs with their families, communities, and co-workers is another outcome having foreseeably positive future impact.

The research aimed to find out if the program helped women entrepreneurs to build capacities. This information can be used in future research to understand these changes. To see the long-term effect of the capacity building, this research has created a scope for a longitudinal study. In the future, this research endeavor can also work as a partial evaluation of the program implications of a2i.

Moreover, the literature on entrepreneurship and empowerment does not deal on a significant scale with how formal institutions hinder or promote women's entrepreneurship. Despite many economic theories and studies on entrepreneurship being embedded within the formal institutional environments, there has been limited research on explaining how the supply and demand of entrepreneurs can be influenced by providing or withholding, through formal institutions, resources and skills for some groups of people and not for others (Goltz, 2015). This research aims to

examine the effectiveness of a formal program promoting women entrepreneurs and the influence of a formal program on women's empowerment.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Women Empowerment

Defining empowerment, particularly women empowerment, is a very complex issue. The literature on women empowerment can be divided into two broad categories: political or civic engagement, and economic independence.

Academicians who have seen empowerment from political perspectives, among them Naila Kabeer (1995, 1999, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2012) in her vast array of work has established and maintained that the central idea associated with empowerment is 'power'. 'Empowerment' is the ability to make choices. The choice depends on more than one option, in other words, the availability of alternatives. The idea of choice is meaningless if there is no available alternative. As she further exemplifies, it is also important to understand that all choices do not play an equal role in the equation of power. Different choices will bring different consequences in the lives of a person. Kabeer associated meaningful choice, availability of options, and how women make choices with empowerment.

Like Kabeer, Jane L. Parpart includes the concept 'choice' in the definition of empowerment and has written that empowerment is the ability to make choices, to speak out, to choose, and to challenge established gender hierarchies (Parpart, 2010). However, in her definition, she showed that choice is effective and meaningful only when choices enable an individual or group to challenge gender hierarchies. If silence cannot be broken and voices cannot be made heard, ethical, analytical, and methodological implications of researching and writing about women's empowerment will be futile (Parpart, 2010).

The second scholarship of empowerment views it from an economic dimension. John Friedman (2006) has identified empowerment as an alternative strategy to the traditional way of promoting development. He emphasizes how the economic transformation of an individual at first and a group of people later transforms society as a whole eventually.

In Bangladesh, research on empowerment has not only seen it from both political and economic dimensions but also incorporated other factors which are vital in the country's context. In a milestone study conducted by

Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley (1996) on Rural Credit Programs and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh, they identified several reasons behind the isolation and subordination of women in (rural) Bangladesh. Some of these reasons are, but are not limited to: "systems of patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence and purdah system (system of secluding and protecting women from upholding social standards of modesty and morality)" (Hashemi et al. 1996, p, 67).

In the study, researchers clearly stated both behaviors and attitudes of every society affect the measurement of women's empowerment; therefore, the definition of women's empowerment may vary from society to society. Even within the almost homogeneous rural society of Bangladesh, the lives of women and men may vary according to different determinants of geography, physical infrastructure, and the configuration of different social and economic opportunities. After clarifying these issues, researchers chose eight indicators of women's empowerment: mobility, economic security, the ability to make small purchases, the ability to make large purchases, involvement in major household decisions, relative freedom from domination within the family, political and legal awareness and participation in political campaigns and protests.

In conclusion, a development program in the Bangladeshi context is successful in empowering women if it effectively enables a woman to make meaningful decisions for herself and her surroundings. In addition, if the development program has allowed a woman to have control over the surroundings in terms of self-confidence, mobility, activities outside of the house, the ability to motivate others; and to have the economic ability to make both small and big purchases, along with capital building for own future use, it will be considered successful.

3.2 Women Entrepreneurship

In the 1970s and 1980s, different authors contributed to the definition of entrepreneurship, and associated entrepreneurship mostly with economic endeavors. According to ideas generated in these two decades, entrepreneurship should be characterized by "strategic orientation, commitment to opportunity, resource provision and control, the concept of management, and compensation policy" (Nimalathasan, 2000, p. 4). This is the implicit "psychological theory of entrepreneurship" according to which an entrepreneur must produce and demonstrate profound psychological and behavioral attributes to "manage, control difficulties and overcome uncertainty" (Loh & Dahesihsari, 2013, p. 108).

Since a great emphasis has been given on perceiving entrepreneurship as an individual approach, the importance of the overall socioeconomic-political structure and its relationship to entrepreneurship has been ignored tremendously (Goltz, 2015). This one-sided approach has also inadvertently influenced the way women empowerment is/has been associated with entrepreneurial activities. If women entrepreneurial activities and its association with women empowerment can be viewed from the country-specific cultural lens, that can provide a more authentic and contextual analysis of problems and probable solutions to those problems (Goltz, 2015).

The sociological theory of entrepreneurship defines entrepreneurship as an element of the socioeconomic-political-cultural-religious interactive structure. Entrepreneurs thrive where the social structure is in favor of them and fail where the social structure is unfavorable. To emphasize, Hughes (2012) suggested that entrepreneurship should be viewed more as a catalyst for making overall changes rather than as an instrument to bring in economic changes only.

The feminist theory of entrepreneurship is an amalgamation of the other two schools of thought previously mentioned. However, there are a couple of departure points of feminist entrepreneurship theory from the other two schools of thought. These are: 1) It understands that the entrepreneurs are the product of social knowledge shaped by the people who are in power or acting as authority; 2) Entrepreneurs act within the social construct of gender role and responsibilities, and 3) Entrepreneurs operate within an unequal society in terms of gender roles and identities. Therefore, the treatment of women entrepreneurs is different from that of men entrepreneurs according to the environment and context they are functioning (Loh & Dahesihsari, 2013).

In a patriarchal country such as Bangladesh, all three ideas of entrepreneurship are consequential to consider. Along with the theoretical approaches, what happens in the field should be studied. Relevant literature and current studies show that in the developing countries of Asia, women's entrepreneurship has tremendous potential to empower women and transform the society in the region (Tambunan, 2009). In the context of developing countries of Asia, there are generally three categories of women entrepreneurs: (1) chance, (2) forced and (3) created entrepreneurs (Tambunan, 2009). These different categories are based on how their businesses got started, or on the primary resources or motivation behind the starting of their businesses (Tambunan, 2009).

These three types of entrepreneurship – chance, forced and created – can create long-term successes in any country. For the long-term success, a country needs to go through three stages, (1) Stimulating activities, (2) Supporting activities, and (3) Sustaining activities to enhance and sustain entrepreneurship, as suggested by National Institute for Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development, Delhi, India (NIESBUD). (Nimalathasan, 2000, p. 67). In the first type of activities, “entrepreneurial education, provision of entrepreneurial opportunities and guidance, the supply of techno-economic information” should be provided (Nimalathasan, 2000, p. 67). Anything related to mobilizing the resources and running the enterprises – arrangement of finance, providing land, shelter, power and other utilities, offering management consultancy etc. will fall under the category of sustaining activities (Nimalathasan, 2000). To sustain entrepreneurship, one country needs to be proficient in overcoming all the challenges the entrepreneurship faces while operating (Nimalathasan, 2000). If the women entrepreneurs are to be identified as sustainable entrepreneurs, they should have the ability to overcome all the challenges (both institutional and external) they are facing to continue their functions. There are innumerable examples that great ideas, dynamic entrepreneurs kicked off but failed to sustain in the long run only because they were incapable of addressing the challenges they faced while implementing their ideas (Nimalathasan, 2000).

For the purposes of this research, it needs to be understood that the a2i as a program helps women entrepreneurs to start as entrepreneurs where the GoB has provided the establishment of the infrastructure. But those initiatives could empower women only if they could sustain over a long period of time, along with transforming the entrepreneurs to tackle any challenges from the surroundings. Based on the above discussion, henceforth, a theoretical framework for this research based on the discussion of the literature is given below:

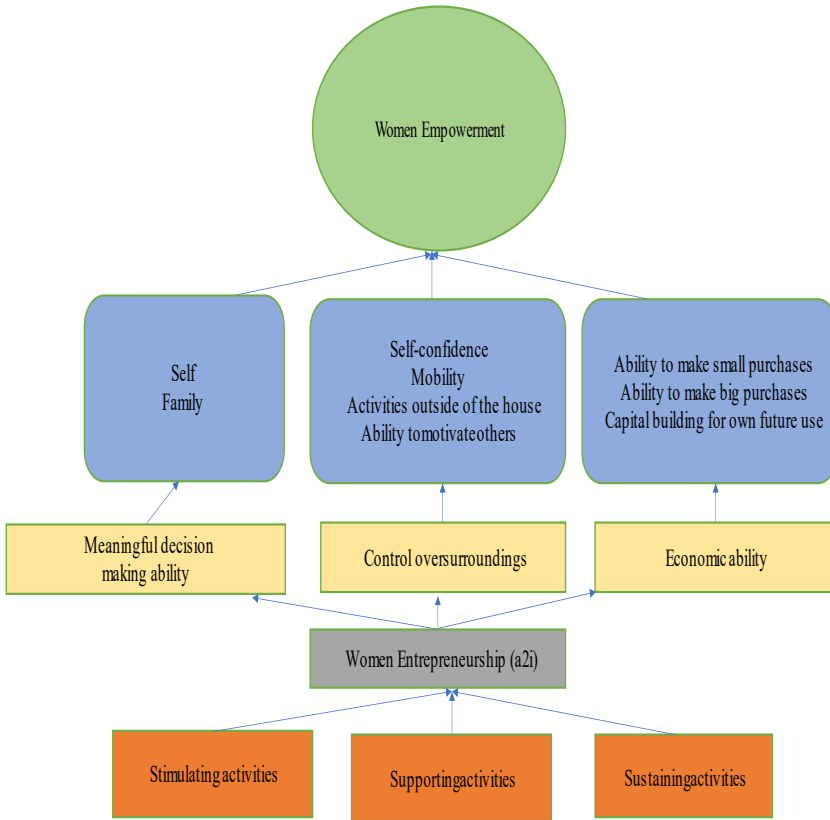
Figure 1: Theoretical framework

Figure 1 shows several indicators for achieving women empowerment. The women entrepreneurship under the a2i program should be able to achieve sustainability if the entrepreneurial opportunities are created with proper stimulating activities getting appropriate support from the GoB. That being said, all the sustaining women entrepreneurship should be able to help those women entrepreneurs: 1) To develop meaningful (and strategic) decision-making ability (for themselves and their families); 2) To create the ability to have control over their surroundings (i.e. they should have self-confidence, mobility, the ability to complete different activities outside of the house, and the ability to motivate others), and 3) To have economic ability to make small purchases, to make big purchases and to build capital for themselves. If these criteria have been achieved by the women entrepreneurs under the a2i program, or at least one criterion under each category, then the research will infer that a2i as a program has been successful in empowering women via women entrepreneurship.

4. Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-method approach to understanding both the quantitative and qualitative changes taking place (if any) in the lives of female entrepreneurs. This paper portrays the qualitative findings of the research. This research presents a simple exploratory and comparative case study with the aim of exploring the effectiveness of the a2i program in promoting women empowerment through women entrepreneurship in the selected research sites. Two different Unions – the Shimulia UP and the Muksudpur UP were selected from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Although both the UDCs are fully functioning, the women entrepreneur in Muksudpur UP is absent despite the official rule that there has to be one male entrepreneur and one female entrepreneur. Both Shimulia and Muksudpur UDCs started their operations with one male entrepreneur and one female entrepreneur. Eventually, female entrepreneur(s) discontinued from the Muksudpur UDC. After completing the pretest, the survey questionnaire and qualitative checklists were finalized by incorporating suitable modifications and adjustments.

Both theoretical sampling and snowball sampling were used for collecting the qualitative data of this research (Lofland & Lofland, 2006; Loh & Dahesihsari, 2013). The rationale behind using the combination is that it essentially provides the opportunity to incorporate “specific groups of people” having tendencies to be “familiarized with the characteristics or the circumstances of the social phenomenon being studied” (Loh & Dahesihsari 2013, p. 111). Snowball sampling was more effective since it helped the researcher to reach people with experiences of using UDCs’ services. Moreover, all the respondents had in-depth knowledge of the socio-economic setting of the two UPs. Identifying these respondents and capturing their experiences were vital for this research.

For data collection, a total of four Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) (two from each Union) were conducted with local community members with separate demographic and sex composition, one with males and one with females. There were a total of 10 respondents in each FGD, nine In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) (five in Shimulia UP and four in Muksudpur UP), and a total of 16 (eight from each UP) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted. The IDIs were given by entrepreneurs and their family members, and the KIIs covered persons such as the government official, Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO), UP member, UP chairperson, Imam of a local mosque, local NGO officials working with women’s issues etc.

The research was funded by East West University Center for Research and Training (EWUCRT).

5. Findings

There was not any woman entrepreneur in the Muksudpur UDC as opposed to the rule of UDCs. Though women entrepreneurs initially started working at the Muksudpur UP, they discontinued. Hence, this case provides important insights for understanding what barriers forced women entrepreneurs to discontinue? How is this example different from that of Shimulia where women entrepreneurs were continuing working under the a2i program? Different barriers found from the qualitative analysis are discussed below:

5.1 Women Entrepreneurs and Their Situations in the Muksudpur Union Parishad

5.1.1 Social Barriers

First, Muksudpur represents a conservative society where society demands that their women remain in the private sphere and avoid engagement with the public sphere. If the women need to earn money, they can engage in activities of the private sphere (e.g. dairy farm, family grocery shop, or tailoring etc.). Because of this prevailing perception of the community, girls who go outside of the home to earn money are deemed '*Kharap/nosta*' (bad/girls from the brothel) by the community. Often, they face problem in getting married as nobody from the community speaks favorably of them.

Furthermore, the social structure of marrying girls at an early age also creates peer pressure on families with girl children. Early marriage is perceived as a mandatory unavoidable social act so that the adolescent girls do not get involved in any sort of socially unacceptable behaviors (i.e. getting involved in an affair/love relationship). Failure to maintain the social trend of marrying the daughters at an early age may result in social exclusion and isolation of the families. The families often come up with a false birth certificate so that they can marry off the girl children before the legal age of marriage which is eighteen.

Second, a prevalent social problem in Muksudpur is the high rate of drug users. This created a sense of insecurity in the community, particularly for girls. Drug addicted persons in and around Muksudpur UP often attack pedestrians walking to and from the work. This security concern made the families of girls avoid sending them outside of the home to earn. Therefore,

girls' and women's mobility is affected due to an unaddressed societal problem.

5.1.2 Low Literacy among Girls

Early marriage results in an inclination of low literacy among girls in Muksudpur UP. Becoming entrepreneurs for computer-related activities requires a minimum literacy, a level which the girls or women of Muksudpur UP often lack. Marriage at a young age makes girls drop out of schools (or other educational institutions). Due to their lack of literacy, the girls are unable to hone various technical skills, such as computer skills.

Furthermore, in a patriarchal society such as Bangladesh, generally, women are unable to exercise negotiation skills. As per the social context, women are not “supposed to” and they “should not” negotiate with their families and in-laws. That is why, when a girl is married off at a young age, generally she cannot negotiate with her in-laws for her right to education or jobs.

5.1.3 Poor Economic Conditions

Due to poverty, girls/females do not have the opportunity to get training in computer literacy, or any technical literacy as computer training is generally expensive in Bangladesh.

UDCs do not give any remuneration to the entrepreneurs and also they are not considered government officials, therefore, they are not eligible for any government facilities. Sometimes, therefore, earnings from entrepreneurial activities in the UDCs are inadequate for the entrepreneurs. Such arrangement discourages women from taking the risk of going out of the house for an insignificant amount of money.

5.1.4 The Attitude of the Community

The conservative mindset of the community keeps families from sending their girls outside of the home for better opportunities. In Muksudpur, families mostly support and encourage a son to work outside the home but not the daughter. Sometimes, boys learn use of computer or other technological devices from their elder brothers, even from fathers; but girls never get the opportunity to learn those technical and technological skills. Besides, boys get the opportunities to go to cybercafé with their friends, or elderly relatives, but girls are not expected to go to those areas. One male entrepreneur from Muksudpur gave the evidence that he learned computer skills from his family; nonetheless, his sister was never allowed to learn those skills. As a matter of fact, his sister started working as an entrepreneur at UDC, but could not continue due to the tremendous pressure from her family. Eventually, she started sending her brother to work as an

entrepreneur instead. One local political leader of Muksudpur described an almost analogous situation. According to the discussion:

“...The first woman entrepreneur stopped going to the UDC even without informing the respective authority. When asked later by the acquaintances, she informed not knowing computer made her work very difficult there (at the UDC). But as her brother is computer literate, he can work.”

(KII with the local political leader, Muksudpur, September 9, 2016)

The aforementioned statement shows that not knowing computer skills definitely creates an obstacle for women entrepreneurs to work responsibly in their position. But what is important for this research is the way the sons of the families in the Muksudpur UP learn computer skills and utilize them while girls cannot.

Moreover, not having the attitude to start entrepreneurship is a reason why women are unwilling to work as entrepreneurs. The IDI with the local political leaders reflects similarly:

“...All educated women want to be service holders. They have little or no interest in starting a business.”

(IDI with a local political leader, Muksudpur, September 9, 2016)

The male entrepreneurs also echoed a similar idea that women around Muksudpur have a risk-averse mentality. He informed:

“...Around 7-8 months ago, I brought a girl after talking to the Chairman of the UP to train her as a woman entrepreneur. I tried to train her so hard, even said that our income could be shared in 60-40%. But when she heard that there was no salary from the government, she refused. She worked for only 2-3 days and left.”

(IDI with male entrepreneur, Muksudpur, September 5, 2016)

Maintaining such a risk-aversion mentality and preferring service to business can create a negative attitude towards entrepreneurial opportunities among the people of Muksudpur UP. These examples provide an indication of the presence of conservative attitudes responsible for creating obstacles for a2i to be effective in promoting women empowerment through entrepreneurship. To become effective in empowering women via entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurs' risk-taking attitude and the enabling environment are crucial. The lack of these two is turning a2i's women entrepreneurship ineffective or less effective in such places.

In sum, different barriers in Muksudpur UP influenced the women entrepreneurs to discontinue their work at the Muksudpur UDC. The reasons are both internal and structural. Structural reasons such as the low literacy rate among girls, the high tendency to marry off the girls at an early age need both people and the GoB to come forward to find a suitable solution. For changing internal reasons, such as risk-averse behavior, preferring jobs to business/entrepreneurship, women being perceived as immoral/sinful/impure if they are working with men, women preferring to remain at the house instead of working outside etc., education, and awareness are crucial. Increasing literacy and raising awareness is central to the removal of structural limitations.

5.2 Women Entrepreneurs and Their Situation in the Shimulia Union Parishad

In Shimulia UP, the scenario is different from that of Muksudpur UP. At the time of data collection, there were two female entrepreneurs and one male entrepreneur. Though every UDC ideally should have one female entrepreneur and one male entrepreneur, two working women entrepreneurs at Shimulia indicate that the situation is better than that of Muksudpur. The question is what are the elements which created the situation better in Shimulia UP where women entrepreneurs are (continuously) working at the UDC, and how that is different from that of Muksudpur? Finally, are the women entrepreneurs truly empowered or not?

5.2.1 Higher Literacy

One fundamental difference between Shimulia and Muksudpur UPs is the literacy rate. In Shimulia UP, the literacy rate is higher (40.54%) than that of Muksudpur UP. Furthermore, girls also get the chance of continuing their studies. The participants of the FGD (male) also indicated that the girls' literacy is higher than that of the boys (there). With education, girls and women are being able to work in different sectors which were non-existent previously. Having a higher literacy rate also made it possible for women entrepreneurs to work for the UDC and continue the work unlike those of the Muksudpur UP.

Though the problem of early marriage is noticeable in Shimulia, the participants indicated that it was not rampant in every level at Shimulia. Not every family marries off their girl children early.

5.2.2 Computer Literacy

The women entrepreneurs had different levels of computer literacy. They received training on computer from different places which helped the

entrepreneurs to continue their work in their field. Computer literacy is not difficult to avail if a person had a basic education, but it is difficult to achieve if the person was illiterate. Hence, women with comparatively higher education rate in the Shimulia UP are more adaptable and suitable for working as a woman entrepreneur. This idea has been echoed in the discussion of women entrepreneurs as well.

“...Four or five years ago I got the opportunity to work for the birth registration project at the UP. There we needed to work on computers. Since I was educated, I could learn the techniques quickly. While I was working on that project, I also got the opportunity to meet the Chairperson and other members of the UP and learned about an opening for a woman entrepreneur position at the UDC. When the time came, I got selected with another male entrepreneur. That is how having a computer literacy helped me get the job.”

(From the IDI with 1st female entrepreneur, Shimulia, August 24, 2016)

The aforesaid discussion shows that having computer literacy did make a substantial difference for women entrepreneurs of Shimulia UDC which lacked at Muksudpur UP. This case shows that women were capable of working in a new and challenging context if given opportunities and training.

5.2.3 The Attitude of the Community

As it was discussed earlier that the conservative and rigid attitude of Muksudpur community made it difficult for women to work outside of the house, travel from and to a long distance for work, talk to men for the purpose of work and so on. These attitudes did not seem to be widespread at Shimulia. However, careful interpretation is required before eliminating the presence of a parochial mentality in Shimulia UP completely. The important aspect to understand about Shimulia UP is the community is not creating any hindrances for women entrepreneurs with such limiting attitudes. A quote supporting this attitude is:

“...People around the place used to be negative about the activities of women entrepreneurs or working women at the UDC previously. The reason behind that notion was there were times when the women entrepreneurs had to stay late in the workplace due to work pressure. This has never been an accepted action in this community. But now the scenario has changed. People these days understand the importance of a working woman. There is nothing wrong about being a working woman.”

(From the FGD (female), Shimulia, August 18, 2016)

It is important to understand that there might be a tendency to view working women outside of the house negatively, but it is changing with the practice of women entrepreneurs under the a2i program. If any (woman) entrepreneur was working in a conservative place and did not receive cooperation from the locality/community, it became difficult and sometimes impossible for her to operate in an environment such as that. Hence, having an open-minded, cooperative locality/community is crucial to helping women entrepreneurs succeed.

From the discussion above, it is clear that the women entrepreneurs of Shimulia UP were operating in a relatively flexible social-structure compared to that of Muksudpur UP. How does this situation translate into the effectiveness of the a2i program in promoting women empowerment through entrepreneurship? The answer to this question is given in the next section.

6. Discussion

6.1 Is a2i Effective in Promoting Women Empowerment?

As the theoretical framework showed in the Literature Review section, to have a sustaining women entrepreneurship under the a2i program, three different sorts of activities are important: 1) Stimulating Activities, 2) Supporting Activities, and 3) Sustaining Activities (details are discussed in the literature review section). Under the a2i program, the GoB successfully initiated both the stimulating activities and the supporting activities. But seemingly the GoB could not provide enough support for the sustaining activities. Sustaining activities, for entrepreneurship, deals with addressing the challenges any entrepreneur face while operating. These challenges can come in a variety of ranges. For example, in Muksudpur, the challenges were associated with social barriers, low literacy among girls, low computer illiteracy among girls, the parochial mindset of the community, and a lack of a fixed salary for the entrepreneurs from the GoB.

In Shimulia, on the contrary, these challenges were less visible. Though no such evidence was found that the GoB directly provides any support/creates any infrastructure to minimize these challenges under a2i at Shimulia. What was important for the Shimulia UP was that the entire socioeconomic structure worked for the sustaining of women entrepreneurs under the a2i program.

In a nutshell, despite providing initial stimulating and supporting activities for women entrepreneurs under a2i program, the GoB remained less effective in providing a (socioeconomic) structure able to handle different internal and external challenges. That is why the initiative did not work effectively to enable a sustainable environment for women entrepreneurs under the a2i program at Muksudpur unlike Shimulia. That shows, only a single program without the cooperation of the socioeconomic structure and vice versa is not enough to establish and sustain initiatives such as women entrepreneurship.

The theoretical framework used for the research adopted three elements to measure the empowerment of women entrepreneurs under the a2i program, those are: 1) Meaningful decision-making ability, 2) Control over surroundings, and 3) Economic ability. Let us examine the effectiveness of a2i in empowering women through entrepreneurship based on these elements.

6.2 Meaningful Decision Making

IDIs with female entrepreneurs at Shimulia and their family members advocated joining UDCs and starting to earn money did make them able to negotiate and make meaningful decisions in their lives (such as the marriage of daughters, decisions on the education of siblings, investment decisions etc.). Listening to the opinion of female entrepreneurs and giving value to their voices by family members, particularly by male family members only started after their work at UDC. Although they yet need to depend on the male family members for making the important decision, this change is a milestone for their lives. Thus, the a2i program is definitely helping women to be able to make meaningful decisions in their lives and for the family. However, to give the answer to the question if they are empowered in terms of meaningful decision making, the answer is, still they do not have the sole decision-making ability.

Examination of the existence of meaningful decision making for female entrepreneurs at Muksudpur UP was not possible as there were no female entrepreneurs at the Muksudpur UDC.

6.3 Control over Surroundings

In Shimulia UP, the appointment of the two women entrepreneurs and their success stories changed a number of things in the lives of them and their surroundings. They gained remarkable confidence in them in comparison to other women. The community members mentioned in the FGD (female) that they often went to the women entrepreneurs to ask for their opinion on different issues and received meaningful, practical, and feasible advice.

Women entrepreneurs of the Shimulia UP furthermore mentioned their ability to exercise vast freedom in terms of mobility because of the respect they gained from their work at UDC.

Similar to the meaningful decision-making ability, the above-mentioned elements could not be examined in the Muksudpur UP as there were no women entrepreneur working there.

6.4 Economic Ability

Economic ability is a determinant in measuring empowerment. Women entrepreneurs at the Shimulia UDC achieved an economic ability that was absent before starting their entrepreneurship. After starting their work, they had the ability to save money for their own use in the future. They also reported being able to buy different small things for themselves and the family when needed. Groceries at different times, clothes, educational materials etc. were some of the small purchases. However, they still needed to depend on the decisions of elderly male family members to make any big purchase (i.e. a mobile device).

Furthermore, in the case of Shimulia, it was seen that the women entrepreneurs were able to save for the future, but should it be called capital or not that is another question. As these women used these savings for small purchases, but for big purchases they had to depend on the decisions of the family which indicates they had a partial economic ability. For economic ability, like the other two components, Muksudpur could not be analyzed as there were no woman entrepreneurs.

Based on the above discussion, the question is if it could be said that women entrepreneurship under the a2i program increased women empowerment effectively? The answer is 'partial'. It definitely improved the lives of the female entrepreneurs in Shimulia, but, due to innumerable obstacles, the initiative of creating women entrepreneurs never became effectively sustaining at Muksudpur UP. That indicates the success of the a2i program in creating and sustaining women entrepreneurs is area and context-specific. It cannot be and should not be generalized. The initiative is magnanimous in terms of women entrepreneurship and women empowerment, but not adequate enough to bring a nationwide change. Additionally, this research shows that such a program functions within a social structure. If the social structure deters the progress of women empowerment with different social barriers, any single program is not enough to bolster women's progress. There should be mutual cooperation between the socioeconomic structure and program implementation so as to make it more effective and fruitful.

Moreover, the a2i program wanted to change the narrative of entrepreneurship. It popularized the term “entrepreneurship” going beyond the conventional ideas of an entrepreneur. The idea of entrepreneurship promoted by the GoB is more of a job for the GoB but without the provision for a secured salary by the end of the month. An interesting finding of the research is that the decision and the step taken by the GoB was a risky one, and had the possibility to fail within a rigid socio-cultural structure such as the one of the Muksudpur UP. This decision was risky as this ‘change of the narrative’ was trying to put focus only on the positive sides of being an entrepreneur and excluded the potential risks of entrepreneurial activities. The intention of the GoB and the a2i program was perhaps to encourage people to join as new entrepreneurs. However, when people realized there were risks associated with it, people started becoming risk-averse (i.e. in Muksudpur UP).

To summarize, a2i as a program is contributing to women empowerment by developing women entrepreneurs; however, only partially. Furthermore, this partial achievement of a2i in terms of empowering women via women entrepreneurship cannot be generalized as this is very much context and place specific. When programs such as a2i are designed, general applicability instead of context-specific applicability is taken into consideration. The most important aspect is to create a flexible atmosphere where programs, for example, a2i, can act with the flexibility to interact with the rigid socioeconomic structure given the limited resources available to work with.

7. Conclusion

a2i, although it is not a women-centered program, has the potential to become a catalyst for empowering women through entrepreneurial development. It tried to activate an environment where women can become the agency for changes in their lives and the lives of others around them and become empowered. This research examined the effectiveness of the a2i program to empower women through women entrepreneurship.

a2i as a program provided supports to establish women entrepreneurs around the country. Women entrepreneurship was believed to work as an effective catalyst to empower women under the a2i program. This research examined two places to understand the implication of the a2i program: The Shimulia UP and the Muksudpur UP. While analyzing these two places, it was understood that there is a presence of several barriers – social, poverty-related, low literacy rate, a rigid attitude of the locality, and not perceiving

entrepreneurship positively. These barriers prevail around the country but the extent of these varies depending on the place/location. a2i remained ineffective where the social structure was rigid and worked more effectively with a more flexible society. Hence, it can be concluded that the a2i program is not entirely effective in helping women entrepreneurs become empowered, but rather only partially. a2i program can address the situation with different creative policy-oriented steps which provide the opportunity for the a2i program and the GoB needs to design, redesign, and implement the a2i program in a more adaptive way to address different challenges women entrepreneurs experience.

A great array of research is taking place on a2i to understand its effectiveness and contribution to governance, poverty alleviation, education, and innovation. However, there is yet a lack of academic research on the relationship between the a2i program and its effectiveness on promoting women empowerment via women entrepreneurship. Hence, this research provides an opportunity for further research on this aforementioned relationship and on how to develop the relationship in the future. This exploratory research used two sites as cases and is not generating any generalizable data by acknowledging that only two UDCs are not representative enough for this purpose. For future research, the number of sites needs to be increased. A longitudinal study of these two sites and the existing entrepreneurs is strongly recommended. Thus, with further research and analysis, a general pattern between the a2i program and its effectiveness in promoting women empowerment can be defined. In a nutshell, this research calls forth future research on a larger scale across the country to understand the relation between the a2i program and women empowerment.

a2i as a program is not essentially a women-centered program but it tried to promote women entrepreneurship in every UP of Bangladesh. This is markedly a praiseworthy and remarkable initiative. Yet, the above discussion substantiates that there is room for improvement in this program for future sustainability.

First, at the program level, there is no alternative to training women entrepreneurs. As the UPs are directly associated with the District Commissioner (DC) offices, the women entrepreneurs can be invited and given training upon joining on the computer for one-two weeks by any of the government officials appointed to the DC office. If the a2i program initiates this step, the dropout rate of women entrepreneurs can be expected to plummet.

Second, the locations of the UDC should be chosen more carefully. Best location for a UDC probably is near the local market. Since it is close to a public place such as the local market, the rate of clients visiting the UDC for services may increase. This will reduce the risk of earning less money by entrepreneurs. Having a better-earning opportunity can increase the motivation for young educated, and computer literate persons to get more involved with the a2i program and entrepreneurs.

Third, local important and respected position holders should be communicated via the a2i program who can help raise awareness about the entrepreneurial activities.

Fourth, to increase the motivation of the entrepreneurs, particularly women entrepreneurs, the a2i program can start providing formal recognition and affiliation certificate. Since there is no formal salary structure provided by the a2i program or by the GoB to the entrepreneurs, this often demotivates people to join the program as entrepreneurs. The formal recognition (may be in the form of a certificate of affiliation) can compensate for the situation.

At the policy level, to start with, empowering women and encouraging entrepreneurship both demand a holistic approach. In a country such as Bangladesh where resources are limited, prioritization is necessary. Education can be a starting point which is also effective in changing the mindset of the general people. The GoB made tremendous progress in spreading education across the country already. This needs to be continued with further meticulous strategies to reach all places and all groups of people in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, the a2i program can include some of the middle-aged/elderly people as entrepreneurs in place of all young people. This will be an interesting and out of the box approach by dint of which the a2i program can directly engage that portion of the population who play a vital role in maintaining the dogmatic socioeconomic structure of Bangladeshi society.

Although the recommendations are practical and policy-specific, it is important to understand that a2i as a program cannot alone remove all the barriers to women entrepreneurship and women empowerment in Bangladeshi society. The a2i program should be designed, redesigned, and implemented in such a flexible way that it can work to remove those barriers from within the scope of the a2i program.

8. Limitations

This research has a sample size limitation. With the available amount of funding, designing research with a vast array of the dataset was not feasible. Hence, the findings of this research are not generalizable and representative. Rather, this research should be categorized as an exploratory and comparative case study. To overcome the limitations of non-heterogeneities, the data collection instruments were designed to get an in-depth picture of the two sample sites.

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