ROLE OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION INTERVENTIONS

Joint Programme: Promoting and Protecting Food Security and Nutrition for Families and Children in Bangladesh

Thematic Window: Children, Food Security and Nutrition

1. Introduction

The World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have carried out a Joint Programme on Promoting and Protecting Food Security and Nutrition for Families and Children in Bangladesh (the Programme) to improve maternal and child nutrition in one of Bangladesh’s most impoverished regions. The focus on women as the change agents for improving both food security and nutrition makes this program a unique initiative. This experience shows that although women’s empowerment was not an explicit objective at the outset of the Programme, the community-level engagement to increase women’s participation in food security and nutrition has been crucial to advance their rights, and that empowerment has been a very positive result of the Programme.

2. Initial Situation

The social status of women as compared to men, in families and communities, is considered one of the critical factors in explaining the reasons behind high levels of undernutrition in the region of Upazila, Bangladesh. Lack of education, learning opportunities, societal restrictions and access to resources are serious constraints that prevent women from bringing about changes in health and nutrition behaviours for themselves and their families. Men traditionally grow and purchase food; therefore, they decide what the family eats. Social and cultural factors also restrict women’s participation in the social, economic and political spheres. These same barriers prevent women’s mobility outside of their homes and limit their access to information and to the outside world.

3. Objective

The overall goals of the Programme were to:

• Contribute to the reduction of acute malnutrition and underweight prevalence among children 0-59 months and acute malnutrition in pregnant and lactating women; and
• Reduce the proportion of the population that is food insecure (i.e. those with inadequate calorie and nutrient intakes).

4. Strategy

Based on baseline survey evidence, the Programme was designed to take immediate steps to improve the nutritional status of women and children in the community and the overall food security of the larger community.

The joint interventions included the following:

• Enhancing food security through homestead gardens and income-generating activities;
• Managing malnutrition among families and children;
• Enhancing education in schools through school feeding;
• Promoting nutrition education in schools;
• Improved infant and young child feeding practices; and
• Prevention of micro nutrient deficiencies, particularly anemia among children.

“‘At the beginning of the interventions, the status of women in the community was very low. The intervention is the first of its kind in the area, which attempts to make significant changes in women’s lives.’”

ASSISTANT PROGRAMME MANAGER AT WFP
5. Progress and Results

Women’s empowerment was analysed through their active participation in project activities, which resulted in improved perceptions of themselves and the perceptions of others and contributed to Programme outcomes.

CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS

Perceptions of themselves. Programme interventions required women to take part in activities outside their homes. The Programme organized entire day trainings, visits to the outreach centers and courtyard sessions. These systematic interactions helped women to review and reconsider their self-image. They were able to overcome their inhibitions and became more confident, and their awareness of these changes made them feel proud of their accomplishments.

"Now family members pay attention to my words."

TASLIMA, PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT

Perceptions of family members. Women are now involved in a variety of activities that they were not involved in before. The training programmes have instilled in other family members a sense of confidence in the capabilities of the women. As a result, women are able to bring about changes in the diets of their families and improve the overall food security situation of their households. Women reported that mothers-in-law are beginning to give them credit for proper care of the children. This makes them feel more valued as members of the family and increases their self-worth.

CHANGES IN HEALTH AND NUTRITION PRACTICES

A number of traditional beliefs that are detrimental to the health and nutrition of pregnant women and young children are deeply entrenched in the communities. The diets and movements of pregnant women are strictly monitored and both the quantity and quality of diets during pregnancy are restricted. In order to counteract these traditional beliefs, the Programme organized regular sessions to promote healthy practices for pregnant and lactating women and young children. The training sessions provided women with information on what, how and why to feed their babies and how to take special care of them. It also provided information on diet diversity and the nutritional value of different food items. Following these sessions, women started to visit doctors more frequently and rely on medical information rather than depending on traditional beliefs.

SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

"I do not bother my wife regarding when and what to feed my baby as now she has more knowledge than me."

HELAL, HUSBAND OF PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT

Within the family. Participants reported that major decisions such as purchasing, selling or mortgaging land, daughters’ weddings or children’s education were usually taken by men in the community. However, after their involvement in the Programme, women started taking part in some of these family decisions. Women appear to have increased responsibilities on certain issues such as feeding of children and daily meal preparation. Women are mainly responsible for homestead gardening. They follow the Programme’s training and the guidelines provided by the Department of Agriculture Extension staff to cultivate their gardens. They also have increased control over the products, independently deciding to sell vegetables to their neighbours.

Outside the family. The community is largely conservative and traditionally does not provide scope for women’s independent participation in social ceremonies or functions outside their homes. During the project women participated in activities outside their home and therefore interacted with people other than their families. Women who had participated in the homestead garden training felt that they had the freedom to ask for
support and to discuss any kind of issue with the Livestock Officer or the Department of Agriculture Extension Officer. Women used to avoid strangers in the communities, especially men. After the intervention they have become confident in expressing themselves in front of strangers.

**INCREASE IN WOMEN’S MOBILITY**

Traditionally women travel only when accompanied by an adult male member of the family. Prior to their involvement in the project they could hardly move out of their homes or village. Their movements were restricted to neighbouring households or to their villages of birth. After the intervention, women started travelling outside of their homes to get health support for themselves and for their children. The most remarkable change is women’s increased access to the health facilities. Although most of the visits were to the community clinics, the women interviewed seemed confident that they would be able to travel anywhere.

**CHANGES IN THE MEN**

The evolving role of women in the communities is also accompanied by a subtle change in the men. Men became more receptive to their wives’ knowledge and abilities and women reported that men were seeking their advice or inputs. Before the Programme men used to be the sole decision-maker when it came to purchasing food or seeking health care. After the Programme, women were increasingly having more influence and input in this decision-making process.

**ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

Women have become economically empowered through their vegetable gardening and goat rearing activities. They have benefitted both socially and economically by producing quality vegetables, sharing their acquired knowledge with family members and neighbours and saving money through selling their vegetables. Homestead gardening has improved their household’s food security and has also become an important source of nutritious food for their families. Depending on the size of their gardens, some women have sold vegetables and other garden items like vegetable seeds, which have increased their income.

> Earlier I thought money should be kept with my husband. But after my involvement with the programme I have realized that I must have some resources in my hands. I have become aware.

*Rina, Programme Participant*

**6. Lessons Learned and Challenges**

The increase in knowledge does not automatically translate into changes in practice. In bringing about even subtle changes, women encountered resistance from family members. The process of change requires convincing family members, in this case, mothers-in-law who are traditionally the prime authority on household and child-care issues.

In Bangladesh’s highly stratified society, where women are on the lowest rungs, it is not possible to bring about change in any arena without having elements of empowerment built into the activities. The integration of nutrition education and homestead gardens provided by this Programme provided the vehicle for changes in nutrition practices that contributed to improving food security in the families. Countering entrenched beliefs has not been an easy process for the women. Change involved working with mothers-in-law and other elderly women who were considered the authority on these issues in the communities.
The Programme was based in extremely remote rural locations where government facilities do not exist. Continued interaction with the outside world, through community nutrition workers and agriculture extension officers, helped women access knowledge and experience which otherwise would have been unavailable.

Mobility is considered an important indicator of women’s empowerment. It reflects women’s ability to access services and knowledge and requires interaction with people outside the family. Mobility is also an indicator of the families’ and society’s acceptance of women moving outside of defined parameters for personal or professional reasons.

An improvement in women’s self-confidence has also increased their desire to be further involved in decision-making, especially in major issues such as children’s education, marriage of their daughters and taking mortgage on the land.

The level of economic empowerment achieved by the women is directly related to the size of their garden. Women with a small piece of land are in a better position to have control over their income, as they are able to sell their products within the village. However, whilst commercial production increased the potential income generated, it also increased women’s dependence on male members of the family to sell her products in the market.

7. Sustainability and Potential Application

The homestead garden approach is of particular relevance to Bangladesh where eight per cent of the land is considered homestead land. This report provided insight into how activities such as homestead gardening and nutrition education have an effect that is more far reaching than anticipated.

It underscores the need to expand the project design frameworks of food security and nutrition interventions that tend to be too focused on project outcomes, and less focused on the social factors that can determine the overall achievement of the project goals.

The comprehensive approach used for the multiple interventions in the Programme areas have been designed for both medium and long-term impacts so that food security and nutritional status are achieved, as well as sustained.

Efforts have been made to systematically include all partners throughout the entire programme lifespan and beyond. Regular involvement and participation of government ministries and local level organizations was also ensured from the beginning. This enables local institutions and stakeholders (both government and non-government organizations) to scale up, replicate and successfully expand the scope of the projects in practical ways.