Women’s Empowerment in Bangladesh

For more than 60 years, The Asia Foundation has worked to expand women’s economic opportunities, increase women’s personal rights and security, and advance women’s political participation in Bangladesh and across the Asia-Pacific region.

SUPPORTING WOMEN-OWNED BUSINESSES

Women own fewer than 10 percent of the industries in Bangladesh, 70 percent of which are micro and rural industries. Women entrepreneurs face distinct challenges that impede their ability to start and grow businesses. Barriers include difficulty in securing customers and suppliers, accessing markets for their products, and diversifying their businesses. Banks and other financial institutions discourage women from taking loans. Recognizing the significant potential of women-owned businesses to accelerate economic growth in Bangladesh, The Asia Foundation has helped organize women’s business forums across the country to expand loan opportunities. These efforts resulted in commitments from the Bangladesh Bank and several commercial banks to provide collateral-free loans for women entrepreneurs at concessional interest rates. Building on the success of that initiative, the Foundation is now empowering district-level women business owners to unleash their potential by providing exposure to ICT, including mobile technology and mobile money, and supporting targeted networking opportunities.

SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN’S ENTREPRENEURSHIP SYMPOSIUM (SAWES)

In partnership with the U.S. Department of State, The Asia Foundation designed and implemented a project to establish a South Asian regional network of women entrepreneurs. A SAWES forum in Dhaka hosted by the Department of State in December 2012 brought together women entrepreneurs from across South and Central Asia to identify country-specific and regional barriers affecting women entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses. Following the forum, the Foundation conducted an assessment and mapping of six Bangladeshi business associations and chambers of commerce, and organized an exposure tour in Bangladesh that brought together more than 50 women entrepreneurs from across South Asia to visit village-level entrepreneurship programs and women-owned businesses, enabling them to showcase their products at a mini-marketplace. Through a small grants competition, SAWES funded the Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry to engage customs and border officials in facilitating cross-border trade and promoting women’s entrepreneurship. A public-private dialogue convened representatives from the Bangladesh Bank, Ministry
of Commerce, SME Foundation, major banks, women’s associations, and women entrepreneurs to identify policy recommendations in key areas including how to achieve women-friendly banking environments nationwide in Bangladesh. SAWES also promoted online connectivity of women entrepreneurs through a Facebook page, a business-to-business web portal (SAWES.org), and five webinars about women’s entrepreneurship.

**WOMEN COUNT CAMPAIGN**

In February 2014, the Election Commission of Bangladesh (ECB) released details that unveiled a significant gender imbalance in newly added voters. The 2011 census found gender parity within the population, yet only 44 percent of newly added voters were women. To further understand the situation, The Asia Foundation undertook a project to analyze the cause of the imbalance across districts, which entailed reviewing more than 225,000 documents pertaining to the newly added voters from the ECB. In some districts, the imbalance was significantly higher than the national figure, with women representing as few as 33 percent of newly added voters in some cases. Using this data, the Foundation facilitated a coalition of more than 35 civil society organizations to unite around the “Women Count” initiative to increase the number of women included in the next voter list update. Launched in July 2015, the initiative combined a national-level media campaign based around the www.womencountbd.org website with local voter education campaigns targeted at women in districts with the greatest gender imbalance. By October 2015, the ECB reported that 48 percent of new voters added in the first phase of the 2015 update were women, a significant improvement over the 2014 update.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR WOMEN**

Women comprise slightly more than half of the population of Bangladesh, yet women and girls continue to face social, political, and economic discrimination and are frequently victims of violence both in and out of the home. Dedicated efforts to increase the participation of girls and women in education, business, politics, and social movements have been successful, but challenges remain. Since 2008, The Asia Foundation has engaged Muslim religious and community leaders to advance social justice for women within an Islamic framework. Designed and implemented by Muslim religious leaders, scholars, and activists; this program has helped communities to understand and advance women’s rights within Islam, including rights related to marriage, custody, inheritance, education, employment, and political participation. In addition, these initiatives have shared important information on legal aid services, medical assistance, and judicial support for women who experience violence. Program activities have also helped to foster a network of influential religious leaders, scholars, and advocates – both men and women – who are committed to advancing women’s rights across the region.

Since 2012, the Foundation has engaged imams’ wives, in addition to imams and Islamic scholars, in order to reach out to women directly and to address issues related to women’s rights and the prevention of physical, sexual, economic, and psychological violence against women. Trainings and community outreach activities have included engaging men through khutbas (weekly sermons) and engaging women through facilitated “courtyard meetings.” These efforts have reached over 1,100 imams and imams’ wives, and many more male and female community members. As a result of this initiative, Muslim women have become more aware of their rights and more vocal in asserting those rights with the support of their husbands. Through their engagement and leadership roles in this initiative, imams’ wives have become more prominent leaders in their communities and are prepared to share critical information when they are sought out by neighbors.