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HARVESTING HER DREAMS



**Empowering
Women in
Agriculture**

TABLE OF CONTENT

01	Apu Rani	04	07	Mahfuza Begum	62
02	Bulbuli Begum	14	08	Malancha Begum	68
03	Gulshan Ara	24	09	Maloti Hasda	76
04	Sumona Begum	34	10	Selina Begum	84
05	Tania Begum	44	11	Rina Begum	92
06	Farzana Akhter	52	12	Tahmina Begum	100

PREFACE

It is our immense pleasure to publish the book, 'Harvesting Her Dreams' to capture the amazing stories of success of women farmers in Bangladesh and share how they made great strides in their communities through their contribution to the agricultural sector. The beauty of this book is that it contains a grassroot flavor, highlighting the achievements of smallholder women farmers. Their progress in adopting sustainable agricultural practices and embracing empowerment are highly commendable.

Agriculture has always been a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, driven by the active participation and substantial contributions of women, who make up 70% of its workforce. Their longstanding role in agriculture however failed to secure recognition for them, instead women encountered a myriad of challenges stemming from inadequate policy execution, regulatory gaps, and societal barriers. Climate change has added immensely to their vulnerability, taking the struggle to a different dimension.

With the intent that women farmers receive the recognition and rights they deserve, ActionAid Bangladesh has been running programmatic interventions since 2005. In 2022, in line with this motto, a project titled 'Women-led Solutions to Food Insecurity and Livelihood in the Face of Climate Change,' was undertaken with the support of ActionAid Ireland to enhance the knowledge of women farmers and encourage climate-resilient agricultural practices. The project was successfully implemented in three districts:

PREFACE

Ghoragat Upazila in Dinajpur, Gobindaganj Upazila in Gaibandha, and Kolapara Upazila in Patuakhali, covering a total of five unions. 500 women received training on various climate-resilient agricultural techniques, homestead gardening, cooperative models, and income diversification strategies under this project. To enhance the quality of inputs and reduce dependency on commercial seed companies, communal seed banks were established and vermicompost plants were set up in each union to promote agroecology. In order to ensure equitable compensation and equal market access, 'Women Market Corners' were also established.

Such endeavors encouraged women farmers to collaborate for unified success, using the newly learnt techniques to bring about change in the agricultural process and food system in their community. This book therefore is a tribute to their journey and commendable success. It is our hope that policymakers, philanthropic supporters, and stakeholders in the agricultural sector will draw inspiration from these narratives and embark on thoughtful investments and strategic initiatives customised to meet the specific needs of women farmers.

I hope this book will be an interesting read and influence you to take the right kind of interventions in ensuring agroecology and rights of women farmers.

-Farah Kabir

Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh



Apu Rani

The Famous Guava Producer of Kalapara

As Apu Rani plucks the guava from her garden for her daughter, she thinks about how life falls in a full circle. She remembers the time when her father taught her about homestead gardening. She smiles to herself rejoicing about her first bottle-gourd plantation with him when she was about 12-13 years old.





Rani's husband is also a farmer by profession. But after their marriages, she was surprised to see that there were no plants around their home even though they had space for it. In the meantime she got to know about ActionAid's Women-led solutions to food insecurity and livelihood in face of climate change project and that they were offering training on homestead gardening. With her little knowledge she joined the programme. As she learned new techniques of cultivation, she taught her husband everything. Together, they began to cultivate lemon and guava in their backyard.



Gradually, they grew a big garden of guava and lemon in their village and started to sell the produce in a nearby market in the market. As they were thriving, unfortunately one day her husband injured his hip-bone while lifting a 50 kilo sack of rice. He was advised to be in full bed-rest. During this time Rani took over the financial responsibility of the household. Since then, Rani became a renowned producer of guava and lemon in her village.

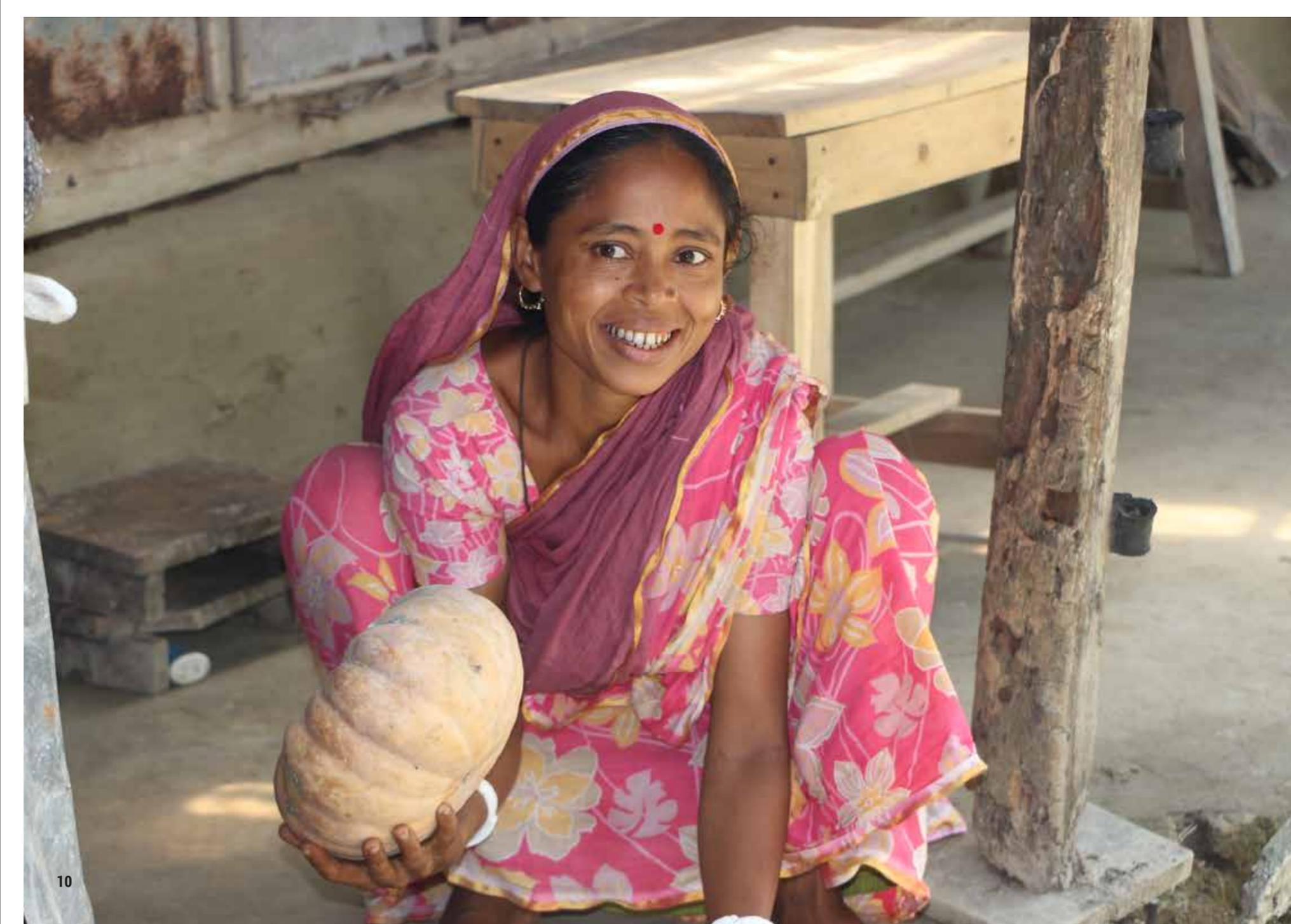


Rani also learnt about goat and duck rearing from the project. With some loan, she purchased a few ducks and bought two goats. Soon, the ducks multiplied, opening an alternative livelihood opportunity for them. She managed to dig a new pond for duck rearing and fish as well.



Alongside managing the finances, Rani also spend time teaching her daughter.

“ I want to ensure a better future for my daughter. She wants to become a doctor. I want to be the support system to ensuring her dream, ”
shared Rani.





A portrait of Bulbuli Begum, a woman with a warm smile, wearing a light purple patterned shawl over a white top. She is standing in front of a purple wall and a corrugated metal fence.

Bulbuli Begum

Unlocking Success with the Power of Knowledge and Courage

Bulbuli's life changed when she started to learn about her rights and gender based violence (GBV). It became a defining moment for her, giving her the courage to reshape her life for her and her sons' wellbeing.

After dropping out of school in standard eight, Bulbuli was married off in a home where she faced abuse and violence. Bulbuli made peace with her destiny thinking this was her fate.





But her thoughts changed when she got enrolled in a programme under ActionAid Bangladesh and started attending the community meetings. She learnt about her rights and gender based violence. She began questioning her life and lives of many like her in the village. As she went to bed at night, she wondered for hours asking herself,

“if this is what she deserved. If her fate is confined within the boundaries of her household.”

Slowly thoughts began to unwrap in her mind. Courage took over years of weakness and compromises. She felt the same energy when she was going to school. She decided to take charge of her own life.



With the guidance and support from ActionAid Bangladesh, 37 women from her village, opened Shabuj Women’s Farmer Group. Under this group they opened a savings scheme with only a 10 Tk monthly deposit. This was to help each other in the time of need and so that they could avail loan. Bulbuli joined the group. She always had innate leadership skills, so she volunteered to be the cashier for the group when opportunity arose. Gradually, she earned people’s trust and was elected as the President of Shabuj Women’s Farmer Group.



The women's group slowly became a part of the farmers federation and through this group, Bulbuli is now working to bring changes in her village and community. Over the years she has built liaison and network with many government departments at the upazila level. With strong communication and relationship with government offices like Agriculture Office, Livestock Office, Social Services, Youth Development, Land Office etc, she has brought in many facilities for the community. She helped many in obtaining agricultural materials, including agricultural cards, arranged treatment and vaccination of livestock and animals.

She played a significant role in availing allowances for the poor people in her village. By collaborating closely with the Social Service Office and Union Parishad, she has successfully secured VGD, VGF, old age, widow, disability, and maternity allowances for eligible individuals through dedicated efforts. She has also played a vital role in establishing the women's farmers market in the village so that women farmers can get fair price for their produce.



Her contribution in the society earned her two prestigious national level awards. She won the Nasreen Smriti Padak in 2020 and the Joyeeta Award in 2018. Today, she is the face of trust and reliability in her village. Women look up to her for help and advice.



She is also producing vermicompost in a common space with a group of ten other women and leased a land with a women's group where they are farming rice and mustard.

“

I think enrolling my son at ActionAid's child space was one of the best decisions of my life. Since then, ActionAid Bangladesh has become my guiding star. They helped me build an identity for myself, shared Bulbuli.

”





A woman wearing a black headscarf and a black dress with red floral patterns is smiling and holding a large woven basket filled with fresh green vegetables, including leafy greens and cucumbers. She is standing in a lush green garden.

Gulshan Ara

Rising with Hope and Resilience

In the early days of marriage, two square meals seemed like a luxury to Gulshan Ara. Her husband tried providing for the family, but situations were not in favour. For years, crops were destroyed by floods and sometimes there was no produce due to drought from where they hailed.

But today, Gulshan is a winner of two prestigious awards- the Nasreen Smriti Padak and the Joyeeta Award for her contribution to the agriculture sector. She is building a better future for her family, as well as for her community.





In 2012, Gulshan Ara took her grandchild to enroll in a child space, run by ActionAid Bangladesh. Little did she know that this opportunity was to change the course of her life.

Through a project under ActionAid, she learnt about seed bedding, selection of seed, and various cultivation methods. She used the knowledge to cultivate bottle gourd, eggplants, and a few leafy vegetables in a four decimal land area, adjacent to her home. After meeting the dietary needs of her family, she sold the surplus in her neighbourhood. Saving some money, in 2016, she and her husband bought an additional 10 decimal land.





Enrolling into many more programmes, she further learnt about livestock and poultry rearing, vermicompost production using earthworms, production of bio pesticides using neem and other available natural ingredients. She also learnt about climate-resilient techniques of cultivation like bagging and pitcher method.



Gulshan has sold more than 120 kilos of vermicompost and to promote organic farming, the Department of Agriculture has installed three deep ring slabs to boost her vermicompost production. With the profit she made, she invested around BDT 200,000 to lease a 45 decimal land to cultivate rice and mustard. She now uses flood tolerant rice seed variety so that her crops are not destroyed even if they get submerged in water during floods.



Sharing the joy of her success, Gulshan shared,

“People pay more for the vegetables I produce. They say these are bigger and taste better. Usage of vermicompost and bio pesticides have made a major impact in the yield. I know they are safe, chemical free and good for our health. These are cost efficient too. Also, since I started the bagging method of cultivation my crops are safe during floods. My neighbours were surprised to see that. I later taught them the method.”



“Now when I look back to the days when two meals was a luxury, the reality of today seems like a dream. We can have fish, meat and eggs any day we want. I never thought we would see a day like today. I can easily set aside BDT 3,000 every month and sometimes during peak season, around BDT 10,000 for savings”, added Gulshan with confidence.





Sumona Begum

Sumona, not Just A Dreamer but A Go-Getter

She was always been a dreamer, determined to transform her goals into reality. Through every obstacle she encountered, she learned to forge her path, and with each challenge, she grew stronger. Sumona today is known as an inspiring instructor and entrepreneur in her village.





Her goal to be successful and financially independent got a kickstart in 2012, when Sumona enrolled her daughter in the child space, run by ActionAid Bangladesh. Through this engagement, she later also became a participant of ActionAid and received training on tailoring. Getting a sewing machine and some fabric after the training, she embarked upon her journey as a tailor.

Sumona however did not just stop there. She joined the 'Rajanigandha Women Farmers Group' and alongside tailoring, received training on homestead gardening.



“ It has been quite some time that I haven't bought vegetables from the market. It saves us a handsome amount of money and I think small steps like this contribute to major household income, ”
expressed Sumona, who now cultivates vegetables in her courtyard.



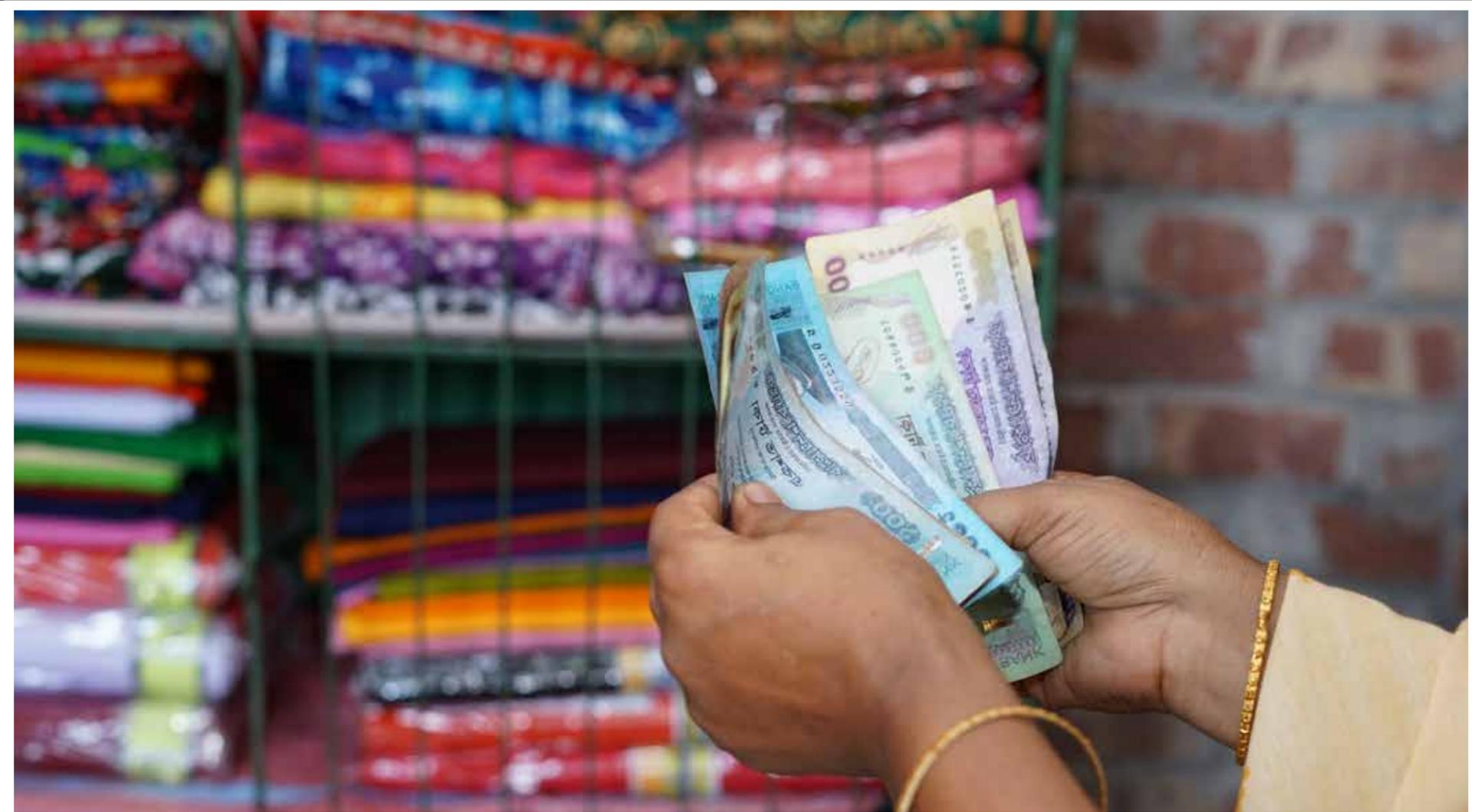


Sumona's tailoring business is also going strong and has become her main source of livelihood. To support other women in her community to be empowered, she introduced a training course.





With hard work and dedication, in a span of ten years, Sumona built her identity and fortune. She bought two cows, transformed her house from corrugated tin to bricks and expanded her business by opening a tailoring group.



“ Talking about her turnover, Sumona shared, Just on the season of Eid I purchased fabric of BDT 90,000. Even last year I could only invest BDT 40,000. If someone comes to my house now, we will appear to be quite solvent. And I do not deny that. I know how I have worked days and nights to earn this status. There were times my legs would hurt from paddling the machine. It took me years to be able to afford a motor-run machine. ”



“

My daughter passed her school board exam and I am here to ensure that she does not go through the same struggle as mine. I want her to go for higher studies and learn computer operations. I want my son to grow up as an educated, humble, and supportive man like his father,

”

added Sumona.





Tania Begum

Tania, The Tailor Turned Farmer

Looking through the window, Tania recalls how she escaped the torture of her first marriage and ran away from Dhaka to Kalapara, Patuakhali. It was nine years ago with her firstborn. Just in a few minutes, she shrugs off her sadness and smiles, feeling proud of herself for the courage and growth she has garnered since then.





Settling down in Kolapara, Tania rented a house and bought a sewing machine. With the skills she learnt from working in a garment factory in Dhaka, she began her small tailoring business from her home.





One of the neighbours told Tania about ActionAid's programme in Kalapara during this time as Tania was looking for diversifying her livelihood opportunities. Tania got herself enrolled in the programme and received training on homestead gardening, poultry rearing, and vermicompost production.

She also became a committee member of the women friendly market under the women farmer group association in her village. After the training, Tania began cultivating vegetables in the land adjacent to her house.

Alongside homestead gardening, Tania bought a few ducks and chicken as a source of additional income. Her poultry farm grew to having 20 chickens and 50 ducks over time.

Today, Tania sells her tailored dresses, vegetable produce, chicken, and ducks in the women friendly market



“

It often gets difficult for us, women, to sell our produce in the village market. Our women friendly market works as a safe space for many women like me. Once a week we come here with our products and sell them to other women in the village, shared Tania.

”



As Tania's savings grew, she bought land to build a home of her own. She also bought two cows and started producing vermicompost to further boost her income.



Today Tania is a mother of three children with multiple income sources. She remarried and with the support of her husband taking care of their children.

“Not everyone is lucky to get a second chance in life. I thought I had lost all hope, but a better prospect was waiting for me right here in Kalapara. With a supportive family, a partner, and many opportunities I am rewriting my story”, said Tania.



Farzana Akhter

Stitching Dreams Together

Farzana Akhter always had a knack for embroidery and design. Her very first earning was from selling a Nakshi Kantha (embroidered quilts) to one of her neighbours, a humble beginning to where she is standing now - a seamstress and a budding entrepreneur.





Farzana's hands-on training to use a sewing machine began when she joined a garment factory in Ghoraghat, Dinajpur to support her household income. There she worked tirelessly for a meagre pay of BDT 1,800 only. Her passion for tailoring kept her moving although she knew this was not enough to meet her needs.

It was during this time that a community mobiliser from ActionAid Bangladesh enrolled Farzana in one of the projects to work as an assistant.



A few months later, the entrepreneurial spirit instigated Farzana to pursue her dream of becoming a seamstress. She invested her earnings and opened a tailoring shop. Initially, attracting customers was a challenge, but her skills and sense of fashion paid off. Instead of focusing on the traditional designs, Farzana brought in what was trending in the cities. Soon, girls and women from the village and afar started coming for her tailored dresses.



As her business prospered, it became a challenge to meet the overwhelming demand, especially during festivals. So, she trained her husband in tailoring and purchased another sewing machine, using the profits. This move streamlined their operations and allowed them to efficiently manage the growing business.



“ I couldn't have discovered the entrepreneurial spirit in me if it wasn't for ActionAid Bangladesh. Thanks to the training and support I got from them. I also learned about homestead gardening from ActionAid which helped me to further expand my earning, ” said Farzana.

Learning about climate-resilient agricultural practices, she now grows vegetables not only for their family but also sells the surplus in the women-friendly market. Having a second source of income boosted her confidence and sense of security.



While walking along the path of success, Farzana noticed that women in her village were still struggling for good quality seed. Often, they would go to the neighbouring village to buy quality seed at a higher price. Realising the need, through the women's network- Shuktara Women Farmers Group, Farzana established a seed bank for the community. This ensured easy access to seeds for free. As the president of the group, she mentors and supports 25 other women, sharing her knowledge and helping them prosper.



“

Today, Farzana wants to accomplish more for her daughter; Would her such that she grows up as a good human being and helps people in need in the future.

”





Mahfuza Begum

Thriving In The Face Of Adversity

Mahfuza Begum, who shares the contagious smile around her loved ones today, did not have a very solvent life earlier. Living in a small village in southern Bangladesh, she was stricken by poverty and the adverse effect of climate change. Her attempt to cultivate crops often failed - be it in the backyard or in an agricultural field.



In the midst of hardship, Mahfuza came to know about ActionAid Bangladesh and how they were helping to empower marginalised women in the village with solutions to create livelihood opportunities and fight the challenges caused by climate change. Scared, and a heart full of with doubts, Mahfuza enrolled herself in the project with very little hope. Today Mahfuza stands strong in her community as an empowered, solvent, and flourished individual, who not only builds resources for herself but helps others to grow and prosper.

“ In the first courtyard meeting, they taught us about climate change. That was the first time I understood why my crops would not grow properly. As days rolled by I learnt about climate-resilient agricultural techniques. They trained us on seed- bed preparation, seed and crop selection, irrigation techniques etc. With the techniques I learnt there, I began to cultivate various seasonal vegetables in the courtyard. The yield was so good that I could sell some even after consumption. They also gave us cash and goats, and trained us on livestock rearing.





Our days started to change since then. I sold the goats and bought three sheeps. Today I have 13 sheeps.



Little by little, i am growing my earning sources. We also have a grocery store. My husband and I run the store together.



I did not get the opportunity to finish my studies and could only study until class 5. I want both my daughters to be able to finish their studies, choose their career, and grow up as strong women. I am here to support them as long as they need," shared Mahfuza with eyes full of dreams and a sunshine smile.



Malancha Begum

Cultivating Hope Through Collective Effort

For 25 years Malancha Begum lived in the village of Katabari in a home with a big courtyard in the front. It was full of bushes, unutilised. She often wondered what a waste of space it was!

The same yard is what Malancha most proud of now-her sanctuary, where she grows vegetables, a life skill that luckily Malancha got to learn this year.





At the beginning of 2023, ActionAid Bangladesh came to her village with an opportunity of training for women on farming. Malancha enrolled herself in it and learned about different environment friendly farming techniques. She is now an expert of seed selection, seed bed preparation, seed production, bio fertilizer and pesticide production and their application.



She was also briefed about the power of forming cooperative bodies. Inspired by this idea, Malancha along with 30 other women embarked on a transformative journey.

They formed the Shimul Women Farmers Group, opened a savings scheme for them and as the savings of the group grew they began to take small loans from there. They ventured into poultry farming for egg production and invested in homestead gardening, using the skills they garnered.



They produced vermicompost and bio-pesticides at home and in groups. After using the amount they required at home, they sold the remaining. They are now selling earthworms too, a crucial component of vermicompost production. This shift from chemical inputs to organic methods boosted their production as well as helped them in saving money.

They also opened a seed bank for other women of the village so that they could get good quality seed for free.

Recently, Malancha has been elected as the president of their women's group. In her new role, she wants to help others beyond her own village. She Dreams of forming more collective groups.

“Alone, I am weak and vulnerable. I believe in the power and strength of unity. I know, I have been able to come this far only because I moved in a group,” said Malancha.







Maloti Hasda

A Tale Of Growth And Companionship

Maloti's favourite time everyday is the morning, when she and her husband work together in their garden, growing different crops and vegetables. A big portion of her land is filled with spinach and leafy vegetables.

Matolti collects fresh yield from the field and cooks fresh and nutrient-rich delicious food for their children every day.





Maloti and her husband share a common dream - to be able to provide and support their two children sufficiently. Earlier, only Maloti's husband worked and with his limited earning despite his best efforts, they would struggle to make ends meet. So, Maloti started to look for opportunities to contribute to family earning as well.





One day, she met a staff from ActionAid, who told her about the livelihood project where they would train the beneficiaries on income generating activities. Eagerly, she embraced the opportunity. The project offered her invaluable knowledge on agriculture, including vegetable gardening, animal husbandry, poultry rearing, and crucial skill of harvesting vegetable seeds.

Maloti's husband joined her too in her new endeavour and witnessed a remarkable transformation in their farming practices. Their crops grew healthier, and the yields increased significantly. With the income from her vegetable garden, Maloti invested most of it to buy chickens. Soon, poultry rearing became their main sources of income, replacing the uncertainty and struggles they had previously faced.





With the improvement in financial stability, Maloti noticed that their food consumption pattern changed. They could now afford egg, milk, and meat more often- which was a distant dream once. Maloti began to sense a new beam of security.

Maloti Hasda's story is an example of how the right opportunity, knowledge, and good companionship can transform one's life.

“

I dream of sending my children to good school and them having a future I could only dream of, shared Maloti.

”





**Selina
Begum**

Navigating the Waves of Change and Success

As Selina sits by the pond to enjoy the calmness, she stares at the water with contentment, looking at fishes gulping on the surface. With a smile on her face, she recalls how she accumulated her resources bit by bit through fish farming, while also building resilience against the impacts of climate change on her livelihood.





Selina and her husband first tried making a livelihood from a rice paddy business and later from rice cultivation. However, both the initiatives failed, due to frequent natural calamities in their locality. To sustain their family expenses, they looked for alternative sustainable livelihood opportunities.



When ActionAid Bangladesh came to their village with their child sponsorship programme, they also sowed the seeds of empowerment for the mothers of the village. Selina seized this opportunity and shared her difficulties with the staff. In response, she received guidance and training on the techniques of fish farming, which is also well-suited to withstand the region's changing climate.



Selina started her fish farming journey, starting with a small pond. She began farming local varieties of fish like Tilapia, Rui, Shing, and Nola. Her dedication and hard work paid off, resulting in a small but significant profit from selling the fish at the end of her first season. She further invested in the pond.

From the earnings she made, she slowly saved some money and used it to purchase a cow, adding its milk as an additional source of income. Growing further, Selina also bought two goats.





Today, Selina and her family have a strong financial ground in the community. Every season, she works hard to increase her business profit, fighting against different challenges. "I dream of leasing two more ponds in the future and having a small cattle farm," said enthusiastic Selina.





Rina Begum

Rina's Journey from a Grocer to a Farmer

Since childhood, Rina Begum was keen to accomplish something on her own and establish an identity for herself. The entrepreneurial spirit in her was evident since then. Rina runs a small grocery store adjacent to her home in Kolapara, Barishal where she now lives with her husband and children. While Rina ran the shop, her husband worked diligently in the Bangladesh Ansar and VDP. Together they were doing quite well socially and financially.





As Rina looked for opportunities to expand her shop, she wanted to add fresh vegetable and cow milk in the commodity list. But, she could not find affordable and quality suppliers in her village. It was also not feasible for her to purchase these perishable items from the local market and resell them either.

Rina thought, it would be good if she could produce some vegetables by herself. But she had very little knowledge on cultivation and did not know where to start. As she discussed this issue with one of her clients, he told her about

“ ActionAid Bangladesh’s Women-led solutions to food insecurity and livelihood in face of climate change project. ”

Rina contacted them and began to learn about cultivation techniques, organic fertilizer, and pesticides. She planted some bitter-gourd along the roadside of their home and started to see result.





Thrilled and excited, soon she began to cultivate various vegetables in the 20 decimal land she and her husband had bought. She learnt about methods to mitigate damage to crops from natural disasters.

“I plant my vegetables on raised beds with adequate drainage facility so that my plants do not rot in case there is excess water. I also got some good quality vegetable seed from ActionAid. This has boosted my income. I started to sell vegetables in my shop and also some seed packet that I buy from the seed dealer. I am getting good response. People are enjoying the fact that they are getting some fresh produce,” shared Rina.



“I never thought I could grow peanuts. I always had them when we went to the park. My children love peanuts. It feels so great to be able to give my children and family food that I have grown myself. The smile on their faces fills my heart with happiness. Now I know why farmers refer to their yield as their child ,” added Rina.



“I have also learned how to produce vermicompost using earthworm and cow dung. Currently I am producing vermicompost in women’s group. I apply that on my homestead garden. This is cost effective and chemical free. Soon, I would like to start producing vermicompost at scale, and sell them in the shop. I earn around BDT 20,000/- per month now. I am hoping with this new skills and knowledge I am going to thrive better. I can see a bright future for not only myself, but for my children as well,” said Rina with joy.





Tahmina Begum

Earthworms- Tahmina's secret to success

“After my marriage, I saw my mother-in-law doing agricultural activities. It is from there I first grew my interest in agriculture. Seeing my enthusiasm, she taught me traditional methods of cultivating crops,” shared Tahmina Begum, who lives in a remote village in southern Bangladesh.





For the last few years Tahmina noticed, yield was decreasing day by day and the texture of the soil was changing. Tahmina did not understand that it was happening due to the effect of climate change which was increasing salinity in the soil. Rather, she thought she was not using enough fertilizer in the cultivation process and began to add more chemical fertilizer in the soil. Little did Tahmina know about the consequences of her action. Adding more chemical fertilizer did not help, but only destroyed the solid nutrient.

As Tahmina sat worried, one of her neighbours told her about the Women-led solutions to “**food insecurity and livelihood in face of climate change**” project, under ActionAid Bangladesh. She enrolled in the project and shared her problem with the project staff. There she learnt how the soil’s carbon nutrient has been damaged due to overuse of chemical fertilizer. From that very day, Tahmina’s hands-on training on producing vermicompost using earthworm started. Tahmina along with ten other women in the village formed a group and collectively produced organic fertilizer (vermicompost). Tahmina said,

“ I could never imagine the power of earthworm. I thought it was a mere insect but in fact it is farmer’s best friend. ”



Tahmina replaced chemical fertilizer with vermicompost and in a few months her homestead garden began to turn green again. She cultivates leafy vegetables, cucumber, sweet pumpkin, etc in her green garden. After meeting family consumption needs, Tahmina sells her produce in the women farmers market.



Alongside growing vegetables, Tahmina invested in producing vermicompost. She now produces and sells vermicompost in the neighborhood and market.

“I don't want people to make the same mistakes as I did. I promote the use of organic fertilizer in my community. As people see my garden, they believe my words and want to use organic fertilizer,” said Tahmina.



She further added, “My income has increased significantly. With the savings, I bought two cows and leased a 4 bigha land where I cultivate rice and other seasonal crops. In a good season I can also employ other women to join me in the field. Today, I provide training to people on homestead gardening and vermicompost production. Alongside changing my fortune, I am setting an example of my benchmark for my daughter and this is a very big deal for me.”



