

Management of Small Enterprises Skill Training for Rural Women in Bangladesh Using Open and Distance Learning Materials

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Abstract: *Management of Small Enterprises Skill Training for Rural Women in Bangladesh using Open and Distance Learning Materials is very much a new approach. A good number of rural women in Bangladesh are engaged in small enterprises and income generating activities. At present a number of Government and non-government organizations provide training and micro credit support to the rural small entrepreneurs, however in most cases the remote small entrepreneurs are out of the purview of these facilities. This programme aims to develop necessary entrepreneurial management skills for the rural small enterprises owners. These skills are necessary for the running of the human development process, employment generation and poverty alleviation of the country. This article focuses on the programme of Management of Small Enterprises Skill Training for Rural Women in Bangladesh using Open and Distance Learning Materials, that were developed and implemented by the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) with collaboration of Commonwealth of Learning (COL) through a distance mode module. Several successful media were used in open and distance mode such as print materials, audio - videotape and flipchart.*

Introduction

Bangladesh shares with many developing countries, a common concern for human resources development including education and training. The development of any country depends on its education and skilled manpower. Like many other developing countries, particularly in Bangladesh, 85% people live in rural areas. Almost 50% of the population of Bangladesh are women. Women constitute half of human population of the globe, and 70% of them live in villages (Yeasmeen: 2001). Rural women in our country have traditionally undertaken the owners' tasks of running the household by managing resources and helping the men folk in agricultural operation. It is time to address the issue why women cannot play the same role as men do in the society? By any logical standard, role of women is equally important as that of men in procreation, sustenance and enrichment of human life. Their role is essential in production of goods and delivery of services. Out of 155 crore people living in absolute poverty throughout the world, 70% are women. As the domestic work of women is not treated as productive or economic activity, the invisible contribution to the tune of eleven trillion dollar is lost or uncounted every year from the world economy. Nelson (1979) reported that " if women who form 50% of any country are

neglected, then the development remain an illusion". So rural women are an important component in the context of rural development.

In Bangladesh rural women generally have to strive to make a meagre living, as most of them live below the poverty line. The abject poverty leads rural women to take action towards self-employment, group self-employment and home-based enterprises. Furthermore, poor rural women experience many social and cultural constraints that adversely affect the success of their ventures. One of these constrains, that in fact compounds the other, is the gender roles ascribed to them by socio-cultural values within which they are raised (Sabina: 2002). There is need to have effective and active participation of females in the civic and social life of the rural community. So we must encourage them by providing and equipping them with some skills and talents by using Distance Teaching System which is very successful in reaching such target segments all over the world.

Background of the Programme

For development of rural women in Bangladesh, BOU and COL, collaboratively designed the non-formal programme in term of "Management of Small Enterprises Skill Training for Rural Women in Bangladesh using Open and Distance Learning Materials". In the first phase, the project developed a curriculum for training the rural women entrepreneurs with a view to developing necessary managerial and entrepreneurial skills, a felt need for them to gain economies of scale and attain sustainability in the long run. In the second phase, the project made some modifications to the curriculum and developed necessary training and educational materials to implement the curriculum. In the third phase, BOU built partnership with the COL with the aim to deliver training to the rural women. The project piloted the developed curriculum and training materials on 5 trainers and 100 women in Bogra, northern part of the country during May-July, 2002. Five training centers in the area, equipped with training and audio-video facilities were chosen to conduct the training.

Bangladesh Open University (BOU)

The Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is the only distance and open learning public university of this country. BOU has opened up a new vista in distance education in the country. BOU was established in 1992 under the Act No 38 of the Bangladesh Parliament. Its objectives are to:

Expand all levels of education, knowledge and science by a diversity of means, including the use of any communication technology to improve the quality of education and to provide opportunities for education to the general public through mass-orientation of education and to create efficient manpower by improving the quality of education in general (Bangladesh Gazette-1992).

The main objective of the University is to provide flexible and needs-based education through distance mode to those, who are unable to attend the traditional

education system and to train efficient manpower by improving the availability of high quality of education.

BOU has six schools in the field of science and technology, education, social science, agriculture and business. BOU has already launched 18 formal and 19 non-formal programmes. Formal programmes include master degrees, bachelor degrees, diploma and certificate programmes, for the distance and open learners. Over 2,50,000 (approximately) students have already been enrolled in various programmes. Non-formal programmes are designed to make people aware as to how to live a better life. Management of Small Enterprises Skill Training for Rural Women in Bangladesh Using Open and Distance Learning Materials is one of the non-formal programme of Bangladesh Open University. BOU is using four media for teaching such as print, television and radio broadcasting and face-to-face tutorial service for each student. It has not adopted computing media and technologies for teaching, for obvious reasons of cost and poor access (Ramble, 1995).

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

The Commonwealth of Learning was inspired by the vision that the peoples of Commonwealth must and can have access to knowledge without any discrimination on any ground. With headquarters in Vancouver, Canada, the COL is an inter-governmental organization with a mandate to widen opportunities for learning in the 54-member states of the commonwealth by promoting the development and sharing of open and distance learning resources and communication technologies. It was created by Commonwealth Heads of Governments in late 1987 and became operational in early 1989. Working with and providing services to hundreds of institutions throughout the Commonwealth, COL is helping to increase the capacities of developing nations to meet the demands for improved access to quality education and training (CEMBA/CEMPA prospectus; 2002)

Profile of the programme

The role of the programme is very important for rural women in Bangladesh. For providing small entrepreneurial management skill training to the rural entrepreneurs, the major objectives of the programme are:

- To develop target group's managerial skill for small enterprise;
- To ease employment generation process;
- To upgrade the living standard of rural women in Bangladesh;
- To lead towards poverty alleviation.

The programme aims to create a pool of certified trainers for the rural women and train the women in essential rural enterprise management skills. With reference to the above mentioned objectives and aims, the programme employed participatory approach to train the rural women small enterprise owners to become successful entrepreneurs.

The training manuals for each relevant subject were designed in distance and open learning modular format following the participatory training principles. Each of the

participatory sessions was clearly designed indicating the trainer objectives, participant objectives, training aids, topic for discussion, methods, activities and feedback on activities. The programme has five courses, each worth three credits comprising a training manual, a supplementary audio cassette and sufficient amount of illustrations (including brainstorming, Participatory discussion, Question-answer session, Case-studies, Problem solving, Pair-work and group-work, role-playing, counselling and guidance, games, use of mass culture, such as improvised drama and folk song, posters and flash cards, use of audio and video materials, and so on), charts, posters and visual supports. The five courses of the programme are:

1. Entrepreneurial Skills for Development
2. Management of Small Business
3. Planning and Strategic Management
4. Money Management
5. Dimension of a Rural Small Enterprise

The target group for the 1st component are the trainee trainers for delivery of the courses because most of the rural women are poorly educated. These trainee trainers are creative-minded youths who have passed the S.S.C. (ten years of schooling) exam and comprise mainly the present and prospective field workers who intend to build up their career as trainers. The second component of the target group are rural women small entrepreneurs, existing and prospective, who are associated with or intend to start rural small enterprise. The learning situation is a series of face to face participatory training sessions with the rural women facilitated by the trainee trainer through the training package.

The training courses contain self-assessment questions for the trainee trainers as well as check the progress inputs for the participants. However, the trainee trainers will also have to submit some assessment work to BOU at regular intervals of the training modules. The assessment work may include – written reports, learning journal, concept mapping or mind mapping, written assignment, case studies, recorded interviews, recorded participatory discussion sessions, and recorded counseling and guidance sessions. Upon successful delivery of all training modules and submission of assessment work, the trainee trainers will be awarded joint certificates by the COL and BOU to be recognized as “Commonwealth Certified Trainers of Rural Enterprises”. Upon attendance of all participatory sessions under the training programme, the rural women participants will be awarded certificates by the BOU, which would help them obtaining credit and starting rural enterprises.

Profile of the participants

As mentioned above, one of the target groups of this programme are creative-minded present and prospective field workers/youths who intend to build up their career as trainers while the other group are the present and prospective rural women small entrepreneurs who intend to earn their livelihood as small entrepreneurs.

According to the information based on questionnaire database, the participants of the programme showed a varied distribution.

About the trainee trainers

The proportion of male and female trainee trainers of this programme was planned to be 2 : 1, but their age distribution differed significantly. The majority of trainee trainers were below 35 years of age. Their mean monthly income was (in Tk.) 2600. The educational levels of the participants ranged between SSC to undergraduate level. Among the proportion occupation wise non-government service holders were 60%, 15 percent were process business holders and 10 percent were in product business while 5 percent were unemployed. Among the total participants, 80 percent were married, 15 percent were unmarried and remaining 05 percent were divorced. Mostly the participants were at the early stage of their career, interested in improving their skills in business or management. The nature of this programme and its rate of enrolment suggest that this programme has been successful in proving the growing interest in BOU programme. The majority of the trainee trainers are interested in this programme because this programme is professional. The opinion of the most of the participants is that they have selected distance and open education because of the flexibility of the programme that allows them to go on with their studies and job simultaneously.

About the entrepreneur trainees

Rural small women entrepreneurs were the main target group of this programme. So all participants of the programme in this stage are female but their age distribution differed significantly. The majority of trainees were below 30 years of age. Their mean monthly income (in Tk.) was 1500. The educational levels of the participants ranged between class five to eight. Most of the trainees were daily wage labour (55% percent), approximately 25 percent were process business holders, and 10 percent were unemployed. Among the total participants, 85 percent were married, among the married women 17 percent were divorced, remaining 15 percent were unmarried. Mostly the participants wanted to improve their skills in business or intended to build up career as small entrepreneur. The opinion of the most of the participants is that distance education is the only educational system that allows them to go on with their training and job simultaneously.

How target group will be benefited

The target group will be benefited from training programme in a number of ways. After completion the courses of training programme and doing all the suggested activities, the trainee trainers will be able to-

- identify the factors and elements of production and market of the rural business
- facilitate participatory training on socio-economic context of the entrepreneurship for the rural women
- identify the market and factors influencing the rural business

- suggest on support systems available for the rural women
- explain the concept, purpose and elements of planning related to the management of rural business
- suggest how to execute the plan and prepare and proposals
- focus on the position of women as owner-manager of a rural business
- recognize the techniques and considerations related to marketing of products and services of rural business
- highlight on the legal issues related to the rural business
- provide counselling and guidance on managing working capital, keeping business accounts and preparing simple budget for the rural business
- Provide counselling and guidance to the rural women on leadership and teamwork in rural business.

After attending all participatory training session, the women entrepreneur participants will be able to-

- identify the factors and elements of production and market of the rural business
- identify the support system and rural and socio-economic problems the rural entrepreneurs face
- recognize the role of awareness building, unity and entrepreneurial activities to overcome the problems and uplift the positions of the rural women
- manage working capital, keep business accounts and prepare simple budget for the rural business
- identify types of rural business and legal requirements for them
- identify the ways to overcome the problems
- know about the planning in rural business
- take necessary steps to execute the plan and evaluate the success of plan
- identify the marketing techniques and the considerations for the marketing related to the rural business
- identify the sources of capital and credit and decide how to form capital and obtain credit
- tell how money flows in rural business
- keep and interpret accounts for the rural business
- prepare budget and financial plan for the business cycle.
- identify the characteristics of a good entrepreneurs
- recognize and develop the necessary skills for a rural entrepreneur
- know the importance and considerations of teamwork in rural business

Achievement of the Programme

After the training; the trainees' consciousness on 'being free from superstition' has increased from 3.77 to 4.77. Their rating on other variables such as, entrepreneurship, strategical, defendant, struggling, capabilities etc. show marginal upward movement. According to the information collected from participants, their scores on all indicators has increased. It is noticeable that mean score of indicators such as 'ability to prepare budget', 'ability to plan', 'ability to collect business-related information', 'ability to approve and implement decision', 'ability to follow up',

'ability to think and take alternative', 'ability to open network', 'ability to assess right and wrong' have risen by more than one scoring point between baseline and follow-up survey. However, between follow-up and assessment survey, the level of importance of the indicators 'ability to read', 'ability to write letter', 'ability to counting', 'ability to count profit and loss, debt-expenditure', have gone down. Focus group discussion with the trainees supports this finding. After the training, most of them acknowledge that these indicators are important in the rural business, but they need to concentrate more on planning, implementing planning, taking, approving and implementing decision, managing workers, etc.

In running the programme, it is assumed that an owner-manager requires having knowledge relating to entrepreneurship, markets, buyers, accounting and management. The rural women informed that they feel stronger on the importance of knowledge in 'management' as they scored upward from 3.86 in pre-training to 4.70 in follow-up. They also feel that it is important to have more knowledge in other fields as they have ranked upward.

The participants of the training sessions strongly felt the importance of being free from superstition, but their attitude towards it in action has not changed in the same degree. On the other hand, they thought they had attained a changed notion of entrepreneurship as they scored higher on the variable.

Significant change cannot be seen in terms of attainment as the training focused on the improvement of management skill to increase efficiency of the rural enterprising women for running programme. Therefore, it is not surprising but realistic to note that mean of ability to read and write is more or less constant during pre-training and follow-up survey. The made progress as a result of training in terms of 'ability to count summation-deduction', 'ability to count profit and loss', 'ability to count debit-expenditure', however, as they recognize the importance of the indicators 'ability to prepare, implement planning', 'ability to collect business information', 'ability to take, approve and implement decision', 'ability to prepare budget' higher, they have attained the skill on these.

Most of the indicators related to knowledge required for the training programme have increased significantly. Variables such as 'entrepreneurship', 'accounting' and 'management' have rise by more than one scoring point.

Conclusion

No doubt the men have received the greater part to play in the life, while women have less. Women have been rarely encouraged to play an equal part in the development but it is recognized that women do make a vital contribution to rural development. Once women are equipped with basic education and skills and become the earning members of this Muslim society, surely they will acquire greater respect for themselves, raise status and enhance their prestige (Khan and Khan, 2001).

Rural women can also contribute to the economy of the nation and development of the country. The management of small enterprise skill training programme discussed in this paper was designed only for rural women in Bangladesh. It is clear that this

programme will influence rural women to develop her as a rural small entrepreneur. It is hoped that respective target groups will get immediate demanding jobs where they will be able to perform their duties methodically and objectively.

It is very difficult everywhere to deliver training programme through open and distance mode. Training programmes usually being closely related to presence of participants and very much practice oriented, distance mode requires much care and devotion. Because Bangladesh is a developing country, it is faced with a low socio-economic status and lack of infrastructure. Thus it has difficulties in providing all services in cost-effective ways (Noman, 2001). To mitigate these problems BOU expected this programme to develop necessary entrepreneurial management skills for the rural women small enterprises owners as these skills are necessary for the human development process, employment generation and poverty alleviation of the country. It is hoped that management and technical capabilities of the target groups will be enhanced when they are trained on the overall management including business channel maintenance, record keeping and marketing.

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