Women Business Centres

As part of a wider Resilient Livelihood programme, United Purpose has established ‘Women’s Business Centres’, funded by Coca-Cola. The centres are designed to improve the access of rural and marginalised women to services in remote areas and improve economic livelihoods for entrepreneurs and female producers in rural Bangladesh.

Each centre is established and managed by five female entrepreneurs identified by the community. Entrepreneurs receive training from the project and are supported to establish their own centre, which offers a variety of services for approximately 1,000 women in the community. Services focus on three areas:

1. **Information Technology and communication services**, such as mobile banking, internet access, market information and courier services;

2. **Agriculture and home industries**, such as training, input supply, sales and marketing links;

3. **Preventive healthcare**, first aid and counseling for women and children.

Experience has shown that the Women Business Centres quickly become an important asset for women, not only because of the services that are offered, but also because they provide a safe environment for women to exchange ideas and support each other.

The Women’s Business Centers (WBC) project builds on other livelihood projects of United Purpose’s and uses the proven Local Service Provider (LSP) model. LSPs are farmers or entrepreneurs who are selected by the communities to become their agriculture and business advisors. After 2-3 years’ coaching by the project, 75% of LSPs develop into self-employed change agents who continue to serve their community long after project funding has ended.

Female LSPs have proven to be effective change agents to influence other women in their community. Whereas in other livelihood programmes of United Purpose, the emphasis of LSPs has been on economic empowerment, however in the WBC project a more integrated approach was opted for to better meet the needs of women in Bangladesh.

Most entrepreneurs are between 30 and 40 years old and have an average of two children, 60% have secondary level education, 70% are housewives and 90% are land owners.
Empowering women and increasing access to services

“Before [the WBCs] we didn’t engage much in income-generating activities. Now we know what exactly we can do to get more money out of certain situations. Before the WBC came into the picture, the idea of vegetable cultivation was limited. But now if we plant the seeds there are more vegetables available for us to eat and sell. All of the meetings and training that we have attended has taught us about these techniques.”

Woman producer
aged 35, married, 3 children
Laxichar, Mollapara WBC, Jamalpur Sadar

The unique Women Business Centre project was launched in January 2015 in Jamalpur, Khulna and Bagerhat Districts in North and Southwest Bangladesh. By August 2018, 40 WBCs had been established with 200 trained entrepreneurs benefitting the lives of approximately 40,000 women. UP is currently establishing 160 sub-WBCs in Jamalpur to strengthen outreach. In Khulna, 19 self-initiated WBCs have been replicated by the local community without project funding and 4 WBCs have been established through funding from the Blue Gold Programme. 10 WICs have been established in Laxsmipur and Noakhali to increase access to nutrition and business approach. In light of these successes, UP is now scaling up the WBC model with the formation of 160 WBCs in the Chittagong Hill Tracts from 2018 to 2023 under funding from the European Union.

Lessons Learnt and Forward Looking

Since the first Women Business Centre was established in 2015, United Purpose has transformed the model taking heed of lessons learnt and feedback from project evaluations, assessments and the women themselves. With the initial focus and strength of the Women Business Centres on retailing, United Purpose are refining the business model and project activities to enhance the following:

- Enhance and strengthen personalise WBC business plans
- Identify and enhance women-related entrepreneurial activities and products
- Strengthen WBC service provision
- Enhanced coaching to women entrepreneurs to improve business and marketing
- Strengthen linkages between producers and markets to increase service provision

United Purpose (UP) has a vision to formalise the Women Business Centres with legal registration. UP intends to create a cluster system whereby representatives from each regional WBC cluster would engage on a district/national level platform to link with larger actors, service providers and exchange learning, operating as a social business.