

Women ICT Frontier Initiative (WIFI) in Bangladesh



Background

Gender inequalities have always been rooted deeply in society, and women suffered from lack of access to opportunities and resources. In many situations, they are denied access to education and healthcare and fall victim to violence and discrimination. They continue to be under-represented in social, political and economic decision-making activities. Economic opportunity, in particular, is where women are said to consistently lag behind, compared to men. Central to this new development paradigm is a vision of sustainable development that leaves no one behind. More specifically, a core imperative of the 2030 Agenda is the global commitment to promote gender equality and empowerment of women. As articulated in the Agenda, “the achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities.” ICT has also been recognized as valuable tools for facilitating the efforts towards achieving the SDGs and their targets. SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) has targets that address drivers of gender inequality and violence against women, and ensures their full and effective participation in society. It also has a specific target to “enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women” (SDG 5, target 5.b).



1. Introduction

While ICTs are universally acknowledged as enabling tools for socio-economic development and for social participation and empowerment, women entrepreneurs continue to face disadvantages resulting from their lack of access and capacity to use these technologies. Most of the barriers that women entrepreneurs face in accessing ICTs are the same ones they encounter when accessing education or other economic opportunities. Furthermore, despite the increased usage of computers, mobile phones, and the Internet, the digital divide still exists which is exacerbated for women through a gender divide in ICT.

The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) has developed its Vision 2021 and Seventh Five Year Plan with developmental targets which address some of these major challenges. The GOB’s Seventh Five Year Plan puts an impetus on the use of ICT for improving factor productivity, governance and service delivery, and on the development of the IT industry. The Plan aims to accelerate growth to eight percent per year by 2015; ensures participation, social inclusion and empowerment; and promotes good governance and efficient delivery of public services.

At this context, the Asian and Pacific Training Centre for ICT for Development (APCICT), a regional institute of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), has embarked on a new program called Women and ICT Frontier Initiative (WIFI). WIFI aims to promote women’s entrepreneurship in Asia and the Pacific through ICT capacity development.



Expert Group Meeting of WIFI at APCICT Head Quarter, Incheon, Republic of Korea (2015)

2. Institutional context

The Ministry of Post, Telecommunications and ICT (MoPTICT) is the designated ministry to govern the ICT sector with 2 separate divisions namely ICT Division and Post & Telecom Division. ICT Division is the policy maker for the ICT sector while MOPT is responsible for the telecommunications sector. The Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) is an agency of ICT Division and supports the implementation of e-Government programs and ICT capacity building initiatives; and is responsible for managing key shared infrastructure and standard setting across the agencies. The Department of ICT (DoICT), a wing of ICT Division, supports achieving sustainable development through facilitation of different initiatives complementary to other relevant agencies of the government. The Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS) will provide training and mentoring to some 3,000 women ICT entrepreneurs to strengthen capacities and help generate sales worth £28 million (\$38m) by 2020.

The initiative is part of “Commonwealth-SheTrades”, a project officially launched in April and funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development. International Trade Centre (ITC) is coordinating and implementing the global project, initially working to increase competitiveness of women entrepreneurs in agriculture, apparel and services sectors in four Commonwealth countries -- Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. The project, the organizers says, will provide governments with better tools and information to implement gender-responsive policies and share best practices.

3. Situation analysis

Policy environment

According to the Article 28 (2 of the constitution of People’s Republic of Bangladesh), “Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life”. Bangladesh has made consistent policy and program interventions from the independence onwards to improve women’s condition and reduce gender inequality.

Government of Bangladesh (GoB) recognizes the need to leverage Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to achieve these ambitious targets and has undertaken a number of significant actions under its Digital Bangladesh program. This program fundamentally seeks to leverage ICT for the country's next stage of growth and development, and support Bangladesh to achieve middle-income country status by 2021. The government also puts an impetus on the use of ICT for improving factor productivity, governance and service delivery, and on the development of the IT industry.

Hence, GOB recognizes the need to be holistic in its approach for leveraging ICT, especially with regards to its Sixth and Seventh Five Year Plan goals for governance, economic growth, and employment creation. This is reflected in its strategic pillars for Digital Bangladesh, which holistically covers (i) Digital Government; (ii) ICT in Business; (iii) Connecting Citizens; and (iv) Human Resource Development.

To attain the goals set in SDG 5 and initiated by Bangladesh government for women's development, the country has approved the highest allocation in history for the sector in the budget for 2018-19 fiscal year. Bangladesh considers women's participation a vital issue in the path of women's empowerment as one of the main drivers of transforming the country's status from low-income to middle-income one.

Women's empowerment is one of the ten 'Special Initiatives' of the Bangladesh prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, the progress of which she oversees herself. Since 2009, she has been undertaking a number of far-reaching and wide-ranging measures to ensure the holistic empowerment of women. Bangladesh has also done significant progress in enhancing women's political empowerment over the last ten years. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has ranked Bangladesh seventh among 155 countries in terms of political empowerment of women. In 2011, the Government increased the number of women's reserved seats in Parliament to 50 from 45 and current Bangladesh parliament has 73 women members, which is 20 percent of the total MPs. At present, the leader of the House, the deputy leader of the House, the leader of the Opposition, the Speaker, all are women. It also reflected at local level that in local government elections a post of female vice-chairman for each Upazila (sub-division) has been introduced. As a result, over 12,500 elected female representatives are now working in different tiers of local governance. In addition, more women are working in senior positions in the public service, judiciary, police, armed forces etc. than at any time before.

The National Women Development Policy 2011 of the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs categorically identified women development as the pre-condition for national development and the government has undertaken various programs to materialize Vision 2021 for establishing rights of women, their empowerment and mainstreaming them in the overall development. A bundle of measures has been taken by the government to encourage women participation at different level, ranging from primary education, entrepreneurship, enabling environment (institutional incentives like scholarship for girl students and special interest rate on loan for women entrepreneurs) to regulatory protection.

Bangladesh Bank, the central bank of Bangladesh, offers a package of incentives for the women entrepreneurs – vide their "Small & Medium Enterprise (SME) Credit Guidelines and Policies" which covers collateral free credit, lower interest rate, dedicated Women Entrepreneurs Desk at financial institutes, etc. Now women have the most flexible and simple procedures for availing credit facilities for business from any financial institutes and private sector also encourages mainstreaming women in development process.

“The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy 2018” reassured women right in cyber space as well as engagement of women in ICT domain in terms of skill, knowledge and accessibility to services and opportunities towards bridging the digital divide gap that exists in the society.

Bangladesh also endorsed the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Woman (CEDAW)” which was adopted in the United Nations in December 1979 to eliminate all kinds of discrimination against women in the state, economy, family and in each area of family and social life and it came into effect on 3 September 1981. Bangladesh has been a role model in women’s empowerment in the past decade, and the country is experiencing an appreciable change in society because of its efforts in this regard. The concept of women’s empowerment and efforts in this area has helped the country attain a steady progress in gender equality, which helped Bangladesh to secure the first spot in gender equality (among South Asian countries) for the second consecutive year at the Gender Gap Index of 2017. The index, prepared by World Economic Forum, measures education, economic participation, health, and political empowerment to measure gender equality of any country. Half of the population of Bangladesh is women and their economic participation has increased significantly. In fact, national and international policy strategies have also been reflected in the policy to ensure women’s advancement so that they have control over their lives and play an influential role in society as decision makers.

The NGOs contributed in a great way in rural areas to empower women. Micro-credit was one of the major tools to create economic opportunities and mobilization of women was important in strengthening their voice in demanding their rights and services. Government is now focusing to improve in the area of women’s empowerment in a sustainable approach, and emphasizing skills development, higher education, technology-based education, and capacity building.

4. Women empowerment initiatives in ICT and entrepreneurship

The government has rolled out a special project titled “She Power” in 2018 to create more women entrepreneurs in the country’s thriving ICT sector, providing them with necessary training and some other initial supports. 10,500 women in total will be trained in different ICT skills in order to create entrepreneurs (4,000) and ICT professionals (6,500). ICT Division initiated the project which was implemented by its private sector partner across the country.

The private sector in Bangladesh has initiated various initiatives to foster women entrepreneurship, and some organizations (e.g., Business Association, Professionals Group, Development Agencies) dedicatedly support ICT and entrepreneurship. The Bangladesh Women in Technology (BWIT), a platform of ICT professionals, has been actively engaged to promote entrepreneurship among women and ICT, and partnering for implementation of Women ICT Frontiers Initiative (WIFI) in Bangladesh along with other partners.

The readymade garment sector embracing the demographic dividend exists in the women led labor market and has around 4 million women workers which is the biggest foreign exchange earning sector in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Service (BASIS), the business association of ICT sectors, also supports women entrepreneurship through building ICT skills of women. A Standing Committee on Women is actively functional to identify the challenges in the domain and facilitate advocacy to ensure inclusive engagement.

She Trades, an initiative of International Trade Centre (ITC), has been launched in Bangladesh, which aims to support women entrepreneurs around the world with a unique network and platform to connect to markets. Through the She Trades mobile application¹, women entrepreneurs are able to share information about their companies,

¹ <https://www.shetrades.com/en>

increase visibility, expand networks, connect and internationalize their companies. SheTrades, which aims to connect one million women entrepreneurs to market by 2020, also helps corporations to include more women entrepreneurs in their supply chains.

There are numerous government projects that have been implemented in the pipeline to empower women through income generating activities. One of the major projects is Amar Bari Amar Khamar (My House, My Farm) which is the flagship project of the government to empower women by enhancing skills and resource mobilization.

The financial sectors also introduced various tools and special credit schemes to support the women entrepreneurs, offering special services to encourage women to get engaged in business.

There are a few learning initiatives that are also available from different public and private sector with actors in building ICT skills for women entrepreneurs. For example, City Alo, an initiative of The City Bank, offers the women entrepreneurs training and access to finance facilities. City Alo collaborates with a local private university for facilitation of the training programs. Bangladesh Institute of ICT in Development (BIID) has been organizing various learning sessions on ICT and Business Skills for women entrepreneurs under Rural Innovation Lab (B-Lab) initiative jointly with Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), a government organization mandated for rural development. B-Lab is to facilitate incubation facilities in rural setup where ICT is the key enabler to offer access to information and business tips and manage (accounts and inventory) the business and communication.

SME Foundation, Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), ICT Division, etc. also have a good number of projects to boost women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh.

The number of working women increased to 18.6 million in 2016-17 from 16.2 million in 2010. Bangladesh secured the 47th position among 144 countries in 2017 as per The Global Gender Gap Report, whereas India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan remain at 108, 109, 111, 124 and 143 positions respectively. Women's advancement through access to education, health, labour market, employment, and social protection has been prioritized in the FY19 budget, which amounts to around 30% of the total budget.

The outcomes of these initiatives are visible now and result in Bangladesh achieving positive progress in Gender Equality Index and also becoming one of the fastest growing economies of the world at the 3rd position according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The commitment and leadership of the government, specially the directives of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, made these achievements possible. Resource commitment from the government and development partners, and use of ICT have been the strategic strength of the development projects and programs.

However, the impact could be much higher if the projects could be more coordinated and adopt an approach of learning from others. Another biggest challenge that still exists is the lack of acceleration from IGA to entrepreneurship. Most of the development projects consider the targeted women 'beneficiaries' but not potential entrepreneurs. So, the interventions were also designed with lower expectations and did not give enough support to help women dream big. Also, many projects alarmingly lack innovation and are not market driven, so not much technology is adopted by these projects with most of the rural innovations adopted by the local communities or researchers, especially in the agricultural sectors. Hence, the mind-set of the project leads needs to be changed aligning with the national and global vision of building Digital Bangladesh by 2021 and graduating to a middle-income country by 2041.

5. Women ICT Frontier Initiatives (WIFI) in Bangladesh

Introduction of WIFI in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been committed to the mandates of United Nations and always been interested to adopt innovative and socially benefitting initiatives taken by various UN organizations. Bangladesh was actively engaged in APCICT initiatives as a member country and participated in capacity building programs like the *Academy of ICT Essentials for Government Leaders Programme (Academy)*. In addition to being the focal points of APCICT, representatives from the private sector were actively involved in the program development of Women ICT Frontiers Initiative (WIFI) during WIFI program development process, especially the module designing and framing implementation strategy. Bangladesh Women in Technology (BWIT) and Bangladesh Institute of ICT in Development (BIID) directly contributed in the process.



Women entrepreneurship is still not a common phenomenon in Bangladesh due to socio-cultural norms and lack of availability of and access to required business development services. In addition, women are lagging far behind when it comes to using ICT in businesses operation and instead, they mostly use tradition tools for managing business. Since ICT is a great enabler to enhance efficiency and capability to manage businesses more competently, BIID and BWIT have foreseen the potential of WIFI in Bangladesh considering the benefits that the women entrepreneurs will become more competitive in the market.

The Digital Bangladesh mandate of the government is another important factor to adopt WIFI in Bangladesh as BIID and BWIT along with the ICT Division and Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) are committed to achieving the targets.

Launching WIFI program

Mr. Zunaid Ahmed Palak, MP, State Minister, ICT Division, Ministry of Post Telecom and ICT (MoPTICT), led the adoption and implementation of WIFI in Bangladesh and always vowed to integrate WIFI into different development programs towards achieving SDG 5. The 7th Five Year Plan (2016-2020) of the Government of Bangladesh focused on gender equality and inclusive development for all. Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC), an agency under ICT Division, has a special mandate to initiate women empowerment initiative which triggered the rollout of the WIFI in Bangladesh.

Department of ICT (DoICT) under the ICT Division led the WIFI launch with a mega event where Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, MP, Honorable Speaker of Bangladesh attended as Chief Guest and Ms. Meher Afroze Chumki, MP, State Minister, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs and Mr. Zunaid Ahmed Palak, MP, State Minister, ICT Division joined the launching ceremony on July 5, 2017 preceded by a two-day training of trainers (ToT) workshop on the July 3 and 4. The ToT for women entrepreneurs introduced to potential trainers the key concepts of women's empowerment and entrepreneurship; presented challenges faced by women with regard to access to and use of ICT and the role of ICT in supporting women's businesses. The session for policymakers focused on the importance of a gender-responsive government, including appropriate policies and support programs, in order to create an environment conducive to women entrepreneurship.



Formal Launching of WIFI in Bangladesh at Dhaka in 2017

An introductory session (pre-launching) of WIFI was organized jointly by ICT Division, BCC, BWIT and BIID on the occasion of International Women's Day on March 15, 2019 where Honorable State Minister, Mr. Zunaid Ahmed Palak, MP, ICT Division was Chief Guest. Ms. Julia Niblett, High Commissioner, Australian High Commission, Mr. Subir Kishore Choudhury, Secretary, ICT Division, Mr. Swapan Kumar Sarker, Executive Director, BCC, Mr. Shahid Uddin Akbar, CEO, BIID and Ms. Luna Shamsuddoha, President, BWIT also spoke at the event held at BCC Auditorium.

Rolling out the WIFI program

ICT Division took the lead through BCC to facilitate the training support for the women entrepreneurs under WIFI. BCC also supported BIID to customize the WIFI modules in Bengali (Bangla) aligning with local perspectives and references.

Bangladesh Women In Technology (BWIT) contributed to the module development, engaged with the government stakeholders and extended technical advisory support. BWIT also promoted the concept of WIFI initiative among the stakeholders.

Bangladesh Institute of ICT in Development (BIID) has been implementing the WIFI program in Bangladesh with support from BCC. BIID has been actively engaged since 2015 and contributed at the WIFI Expert Group Meetings at APCICT. BIID also customized the WIFI modules to make sure the contents relevant to local women entrepreneurs.



Participants at WIFI training



"Undoubtedly, WIFI training is a very well training program. I found it would be very helpful to go ahead to accomplish my business plan. It will be more appreciable if WIFI training program provide required link-up for the future Entrepreneur(s) after completion of the training program".

Ms. Mazeda Afrose

Participant, WIFI Training Program, Bangladesh

A Model of Public Private Partnership (PPP)

WIFI implementation in Bangladesh has been a model for multi-stakeholder partnership. Private sector organization (i.e. BIID and BWIT) role was instrumental in guiding and supporting ICT Division, Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) and Department of ICT to roll out WIFI in Bangladesh. Since both the organizations are mandated to pursue ICT4D and a goal to facilitate women in ICT as well as committed to UNPACICT to ensure Bangladesh role in WIFI as a leading country. BIID and BWIT organized the pre-launching of WIFI to create awareness and sensitization of the stakeholders on WIFI.



Pre-Launching of WIFI Bangladesh (2017)

ICT Division extended support and mobilized resources to launch the WIFI initiative in Bangladesh and organized a series of activities including ToT sessions where around 80 participants joined from different stakeholder groups including government and private sectors. BCC, DoICT, BIID and BWIT jointly organized the event and make a success.



Participants in the ToT program at the Joint Plenary session of the WIFI, Dhaka, 2017

The Government allocated resources for the launch through DoICT, and for rolling out the WIFI program in Bangladesh through BCC. BCC has an annual budget for training and capacity building which is being invested for the ongoing WIFI training.

WIFI program in Bangladesh adopted a couple of innovative approach to scale up. The most effective one is **PPP (Public Private Partnership) Model** where the private sector partners along with the government agencies work collaboratively for implementation of the program. Government's role is more on facilitation of resources while private sector partner's role is more on delivery of training, monitoring and maintaining the social media platform. Another strategy which has been adopted to scale up the WIFI program is **integrating WIFI modules into other similar initiatives**, namely the fact that the *She Power* project has adopted WIFI as a component of the project activities.

Financial and non-financial resources were utilized in the implementation of the program. Non-financial resources including expert support and mentoring from government officials and private sectors partners were extended for the program.

Partners of WIFI Bangladesh interact and meet at regular intervals to review the progress of implementation. BCC has been organizing the follow up meetings since the launch of the WIFI to update the stakeholders on the status. BCC assigned a focal point to coordinate the WIFI activities and share information with the partners.

Selection method and enrolment for WIFI

Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) publishes advertisements in newspaper and online (including social media) through which participants are primarily chosen, mainly for the entrepreneur track. In addition, BCC sends out invitation letters to different government departments and partners to invite them to nominate participants for WIFI, especially for the policy track, and around 60 participants joined the policy track since the launch of WIFI in Bangladesh.

In addition, projects with a similar mandate (which adopted WIFI Modules) also enrolled for the entrepreneur track.

Challenges

WIFI program faced multiple challenges during the launch and implementation. One major challenge was resource mobilization from the respective government agencies. Since WIFI was not included in the annual development plan, budget provision was a critical challenge to resolve, which was resolved through series of inter-department discussions and supports from the private sector contribution. The leadership at ICT Division was instrumental in resolving these challenges. The roll out of WIFI was still a challenge in terms of identifying right candidates for the training during the initial stage when the training was open for all with mostly students (without specific goals) enrolling for the program and later changing their mind through the introduction of selection process (setting criterion), and also identifying participants from different sources like SME Foundation, Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, etc.

The need to strengthen monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

Implementing agencies introduced simple feedback system rather than a systematic monitoring and evolution system for WIFI considering the nature of WIFI implementation process. In general, BCC collects feedback forms from the participants immediately after the training program to assess the quality of the training and participant views on potential application of WIFI in real life. Since the She Power and other projects have adopted the WIFI program, the projects use their M&E tools to evaluate the program.

Results are promising

The results of WIFI Program in Bangladesh are multi-fold. The program influenced the policy makers to adopt and initiate ICT training for women entrepreneurs on a bigger scale which was reflected in the recent project (She Power) where WIFI was adopted. It also influenced organizations, namely the fact that BIID and BWIT advocated WIFI program as a tool for women empowerment, and supported the implementation of WIFI training. BIID also discussed with a local financial institute for collaboration on enrolling women entrepreneurs for WIFI program and extending further support for the businesses. Finally, WIFI results in the enhancement of ICT skills of women to become more competitive in the market. This led to empower women through economic growth and advance their social status. Altogether the WIFI program steers Bangladesh towards achieving SDG 5 and other national development goals set in the 7th 5 Year Plan of the government.

Currently, WIFI program is functional through the She Power project and BCC has been conducting the training through BIID. The major strength of WIFI program is the *Champions* from different stakeholders, both in government and private sectors. These Champions are the torch bearers of WIFI advocating scaling up. On the other hand, there are certain weaknesses in the WIFI implementation in Bangladesh. The main weaknesses are the absence of time-bound action plan and resource allocation to achieve the target. Another weakness is the lack of coordination among the implementing partners which resulted in the lack of understanding about the inclusive approach of WIFI program.

Since 2017, more than 5,300 women have been trained under the WIFI entrepreneur track, who learned the usage of ICT for business management and more than 100 women policy makers have more clarity on women empowerment issues. The Bangla version of WIFI training modules has been published for the participants for better understanding of the content. Also, the awareness has been increased on WIFI at policy level which is a major output of the program.

Champions led the WIFI implementation

Having the team of Champions is the biggest outcome of the WIFI Program, who are leading the implementation and scaling up of the initiative. Though there is no specific M&E system in place to document the outcome of the WIFI program, a significant number of women has adopted WIFI learning in their business management practices.

WIFI benefited wider stakeholders

WIFI Program benefitted stakeholders in Bangladesh in different ways. *Government* is one of the key beneficiaries by adopting the APCICT initiative which reconfirms Bangladesh mandate to support UN on women empowerment towards achieving SDG 5. The WIFI program is also supportive of attaining the Digital Bangladesh Mandate of the government by 2021. At organizational level, ICT Division, Bangladesh Computer Council and Department of ICT were directly benefitted from the WIFI program. *Policy makers* from different government agencies (i.e. Ministry of Women and Child Affairs) and other organizations (i.e. SME Foundation) also benefitted from availing the Training of Trainer (ToT) sessions on policy issues on women empowerment. *BIID* also benefitted from the WIFI program in terms of in-house capacity building of relevant human resources on the conceptual framework of WIFI and training modules. This also opened up opportunities for BIID to adopt the concept in BIID's regular training programs for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The *women entrepreneurs* and participants of WIFI Program are the major beneficiaries by joining the training sessions. Around 5,300 women have already been enrolled and have benefitted from the WIFI program in addition to the approximately 100 professional policy makers and ToT participants.

Beyond entrepreneurs

The participants of WIFI program apply what they learnt mostly in their professional work as an entrepreneur or employee. Since women entrepreneurship was still not very popular and socially less acceptable, a significant number of women participants accommodated themselves with a job instead of pursuing a career as an entrepreneur. Most of them have been accommodated in private sector organizations. This also helped the private sector to have ICT skilled and efficient human resource. More information will be available about how and where women are improved in their lives and have started their enterprises after the completion of the *She Power* project which has accommodated the largest group of women entrepreneurs.

Making WIFI stronger

The WIFI program need to be improved in two aspects, one of which is more active engagement of APCICT for at least 3 years to ensure handholding with the local partners and extend support to have a structured monitoring system and documentation. The second aspect is to engage the private sectors (like Financial Institutes) in the implementation as well as widening the service portfolio including facilitation of business development services for the participating women entrepreneurs. BCC along with other partners is still having discussions about bringing more partners in the WIFI Program and BIID is having discussions with a financial institute about promoting WIFI program among their women clients (Entrepreneurs). WIFI program can be also customized targeting the micro-enterprises since they are the largest segment of the women entrepreneurs.

Since the WIFI program has been a regional initiative, this may be discussed at other relevant discussion forums of APCICT, and this could help Bangladesh (and applicable to other countries as well) to get updates from other implementing countries of WIFI Program.

Insights and lessons learned

Usage of ICT for women entrepreneurs has been a long-discussed agenda under Digital Bangladesh mandate and WIFI Program was most perfectly suited initiative to introduce to empower women in a sustainable approach. The WIFI Program was introduced in 2017 and during the implementation, some important lessons were learned as follows:

1. Identifying the women entrepreneurs for WIFI was a challenge. There are many women in the business sector, but this segmentation is very unique. One segment belonged from the upper class of the society which did not need the WIFI support while another one, the largest segment engaged in business, belonged to the micro enterprises, readiness of which was very low to avail ICT facilities so they were never targeted. Another segment intended to enroll was also micro and actively engaged in social media-based businesses, but this segment was always out of the net of WIFI program. So, the WIFI program can be reviewed in terms of serving different segments.
2. Successful implementation of any innovative initiative requires political wills as well as resource commitments which was mismatched during the implementation of WIFI in Bangladesh. The program was highly appreciated at different levels, but no initiatives were taken to mobilize resources for scaling up as per commitments. The progress so far made results from the personal initiatives of the *Champions* within the stakeholders.
3. The WIFI program was supply driven rather than meeting the demand of the women enterprises. Since it was developed based on regional aspects, country modules should focus on local needs and address the local issues. Though the Bangla version was an attempt to minimize the gap but due to resource constraints it could not be accomplished.

Way forward and scaling up

The ICT Division set a target to train 30,000 women by 2021 under the WIFI program and explored prospects to scale up the WIFI Bangladesh program to achieve the targets set in SDG 5 and other national development agendas from the partners. BIID and BWIT are also having discussions about fostering WIFI program nationwide. BIID initiated dialogue with City Alo, an initiative of City Bank Bangladesh to offer WIFI training among their women entrepreneurs across the country. In addition, BIID will integrate the major components of WIFI modules for the women entrepreneurs under Girls Café initiative in which Rotary International District 3281 has been engaged.

ICT Division led by Mr. Zunaid Ahmed Palak, MP is under the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology of the government of Bangladesh. ICT Division has different agencies including Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) and Department of ICT (DoICT), each of which has specific roles and activities. ICT Division is the supreme authority for approving any ICT projects under the Ministry, and BCC and DoICT are responsible for designing, planning, and implementation of programs and project development.

Strategies to ensure sustainability of WIFI program

A set of strategies already in place to achieve the targets includes –

1. Integrate WIFI Program as a regular program of ICT Division through BCC and mobilize resources accordingly. BCC will extend the training service in 6 regional centres to ensure participation from local communities.
2. Introduce WIFI Program to new partner organizations and adopt it in different private sector projects like CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives and development projects managed by NGOs.

3. Customize the training modules to reach the wider micro businesses managed by women entrepreneurs and develop a mobile application for the WIFI Program.
4. Build broader partnership between different stakeholders (i.e. Government agencies, private sector, Civil society and Academia), define specific roles and assign activities

Key factors in ensuring sustainability and scaling up WIFI

- Leadership from the ICT Division is crucial to achieve the targets set for WIFI Bangladesh Program. A comprehensive plan of action can be developed in consultation with APCICT and local partner organizations.
- Availability of resources (financial and human resources) for rolling out the activities is also very important to ensure success of WIFI program. BCC can take the lead to conduct the ToT and organize series of training sessions for the policy-makers track.
- A collaborative plan jointly led by APCICT and ICT Division will be key for resource mobilization to achieve the target set by for WIFI in Bangladesh. This will be an extensive process. BIID and BWIT can facilitate the consultation process to bring all stakeholders to the discussion table to formulate the strategy.
- Engagement of private sector will be a breakthrough in WIFI Implementation in Bangladesh. The business associations and corporate houses can facilitate WIFI Training and also offer support services like access to finance, mentoring, etc. to the participants to ensure sustainability of the program.

Steps forward

Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) has discussion with the partners of WIFI Bangladesh program about organizing a series of planning sessions and devising the next course of action. By 2019, a new plan of action will be developed for next 2 years along with the strategies.

APCICT is in the core

APCICT may take the special initiative to expedite the WIFI Program, organize country specific meetings for scaling it up and reach the target of 30,000 women entrepreneurs by 2021. APCICT can support Bangladesh in the following areas:

1. To support the Bangladesh team (stakeholders) for developing the plan of action
2. To develop an M&E framework to ensure timely implementation of the WIFI program
3. To revise the training modules and develop a mobile application
4. To join and support ToT sessions



Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) is a statutory body under the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology, Government of Bangladesh (GOB). It was established by Act No IX of 1990 passed by the Parliament. The main activities are (not limited to) encouraging and providing support for ICT related activities, formulating national ICT strategy and policy, creating standards and specifications of ICT tools for government organizations according to their necessity, working for human resource development in ICT sector. It has also established National Data Center for hosting all the government websites, e-mail services and web applications.

<http://bcc.gov.bd/site/page/01cbf22a-b9f5-4a67-829e-55c27ab216f6/->



Bangladesh Women in Technology (BWIT) is dedicated to mobilizing women involved in all levels of the technology industry and to create a wide range of professional development and networking opportunities for growth of its constituents and to make meaningful contribution in the growth of Bangladesh. The goal of the Forum or the platform where women in technology are recognized and promoted, encourage young women to participate in the technology industry as professionals and entrepreneurs by supporting their activities. Presently, women professionals and entrepreneurs do exist and are making significant contributions in their individual capacity in various institutions and fields. The Forum is a collective expression of their talent and by providing leadership to bring larger numbers of women into tech industry.

http://www.bwit-bd.com/about_us.php



Bangladesh Institute of ICT in Development (BIID) is a distinct inclusive business initiative to support development and promotion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based services. Our inclusive approach ensured serving the poor in a sustainable way through market led approach. The distinction of BIID lies in clear identification of ICT as a cross cutting development tools and create opportunities through continuous knowledge management, innovation and development. It is BIID's vision to become the market leader in ICT for Development (ICT4D) sector providing services to both public (Government and NGOs) and private sector. Our strategic objective is Leading Through Innovation.

<http://www.biid.org.bd/#aboutUs>

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