

**EMPOWERING WOMEN
IN BANGLADESH**

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“This is an exciting time for women in all countries. Governments are recognizing they cannot continue to develop and prosper without fully engaging one half of their population.”
Michelle Bachelet, UN Women Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

Our research objective was to find opportunities for women in Bangladesh to transform themselves and their communities through programs that can be implemented by libraries in Bangladesh. To best address the unique challenges that women in Bangladesh face, we reviewed numerous reports, articles, documentaries, and other videos on the status of women in Bangladesh, along with over 40 programs from nonprofits, corporations, and NGOs supporting the empowerment of women in Bangladesh and around the world.

While gender parity has been reached throughout the country in both primary and secondary schools and the women’s labor force has increased from 24% in 2010 to 36% in 2013, showing improvement in the status of women in Bangladesh, the country continues to be a culture deeply rooted in patriarchal values where women are seen as second class citizens (*Girls’ Education Bangladesh, 2017; Development of Women, 2015*). Laws protecting women are often not enforced. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics found that of 22,775 households, 50% of women stated they had been physically abused and even though illegal, a UNICEF study from 2005-2013 found that 29% of girls were married before the age of 15 and 65% before the age of 18 (*80% Bangladeshi Women, 2016*). In conflict with her pledge to end child marriage by 2041, female Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has considered legislation pushing the legal limit of marriage back to the age of 16 (*Bangladesh: Girls Damaged by Marriage, 2015*). Once married, girls and women are forced to drop out of school, their mobility is restricted, and they often become child or young mothers. The illiteracy rates of women in rural areas was found to be 55.5% while women in cities had an illiteracy rate of 39.2% (Alamgir, 2014).

Women in Bangladesh are at the effect of time poverty. Housework in Bangladesh continues to fall to the domain of women making them responsible for gathering water, collecting biomass fuel, laundry, cooking, and childcare on top of any paid work they might have, making it very difficult for women to find the time to learn to read, educate themselves, or start a business.

Women are disproportionately affected when disaster strikes (*Gender and Emergencies, 2013*). In the 2004 Asian tsunami, four times more women died than men (Collins, et al, 2009, p. 44). Women’s restricted decision making power and mobility puts them at increased risk of injury or death during cyclones or floods (*Women and Girls, 2010*). Many women do not know how to swim and are restricted by their clothes. When disaster strikes, men are often out fishing or working in cities, leaving women to fend for themselves and their children (Collins et al, 2009, p. 44-45).

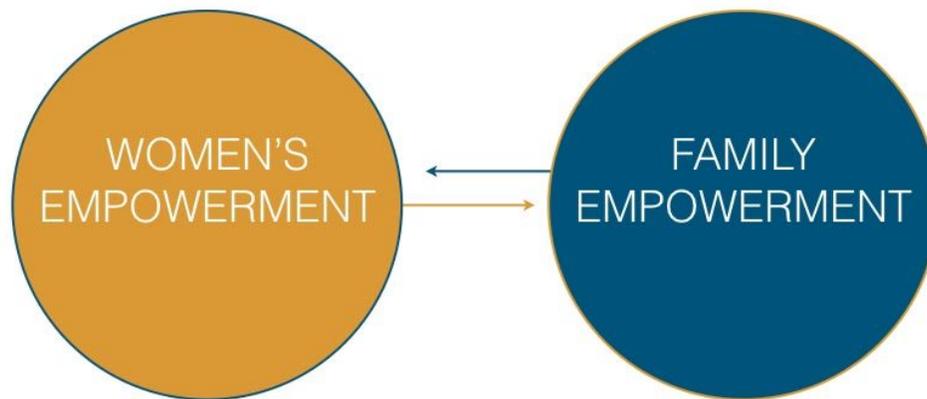
Women in Bangladesh face complex and daunting challenges, many based on years of cultural, religious, and societal traditions.

The question arises: How best to make a difference given all these obstacles?

PROGRAMMING STRATEGIES

The value of “family” in Bangladesh is extremely important and placing familial needs ahead of individual ones is common and expected (Anderton, 2015). Embracing this idea seems counterintuitive

in developing a women's empowerment program, one where we want individual women to feel freedom and embrace their value. However, we want to capitalize on the reputation that libraries have as being the go-to safe haven for families to learn and grow together. Therefore, our programming suggestions equate women's empowerment within family empowerment and family empowerment with women's empowerment.



In doing this, our goal is to engage all members of the community in empowering women and help them to develop a deep understanding of why women's empowerment benefits everyone. We want men and women, boys and girls alike, to embrace this idea and be part of the conversation. We believe presenting women's empowerment in this way, through this viewpoint of placing familial needs ahead of individual ones, communities will see that it is best for their families to ensure that women are empowered, are able to make decisions for themselves, and are proactive members and leaders of society.

We see the brand of public libraries as wholesome, educational, community focused, and embracing diversity. It is because of this, we have veered away from more controversial, yet extremely valuable, programming suggestions such as tackling violence against women, enforcing laws for women, or child prostitution. We believe our programming suggestions will have the power to indirectly impact these areas of women's lives in Bangladesh while keeping public libraries, librarians, and those who participate in the programming safe.

The programs we suggest are intended to bring the community together, make men part of the conversation, and reach as many people as possible. Our two programming suggestions are:

1. **FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH:** A four-branch family empowerment program that includes informational classes for men to attend, confidence and self-esteem classes for women, literacy classes, and disaster preparedness.
2. **BANGLADESHI SOAPIES:** A unique form of edutainment shared via cell phone technology that would pull content directly from the curriculum of the *Family Resiliency Bangladesh* program.

We believe developing this kind of programming, delivered through the Bangladesh library system, could not have come at a more perfect time given that the role of libraries and librarians have changed dramatically in the 21st century. Whereas libraries used to be the only place to access reliable

information, with the Digital Age, information is readily available to anyone with a computer or smart device and internet. This has caused libraries to shed their reputation as passive centers of quiet reading and reimagine themselves as active community centers, meeting halls, art galleries, cafes, and more.

Librarians are now looked upon to be curators of knowledge, art, and innovative programming. They are seen as leaders of social change in their communities, gatekeepers of the possibility of what their community could become.

We believe our programming suggestions match this new inspiring role of libraries while being implementable at the grassroots level.

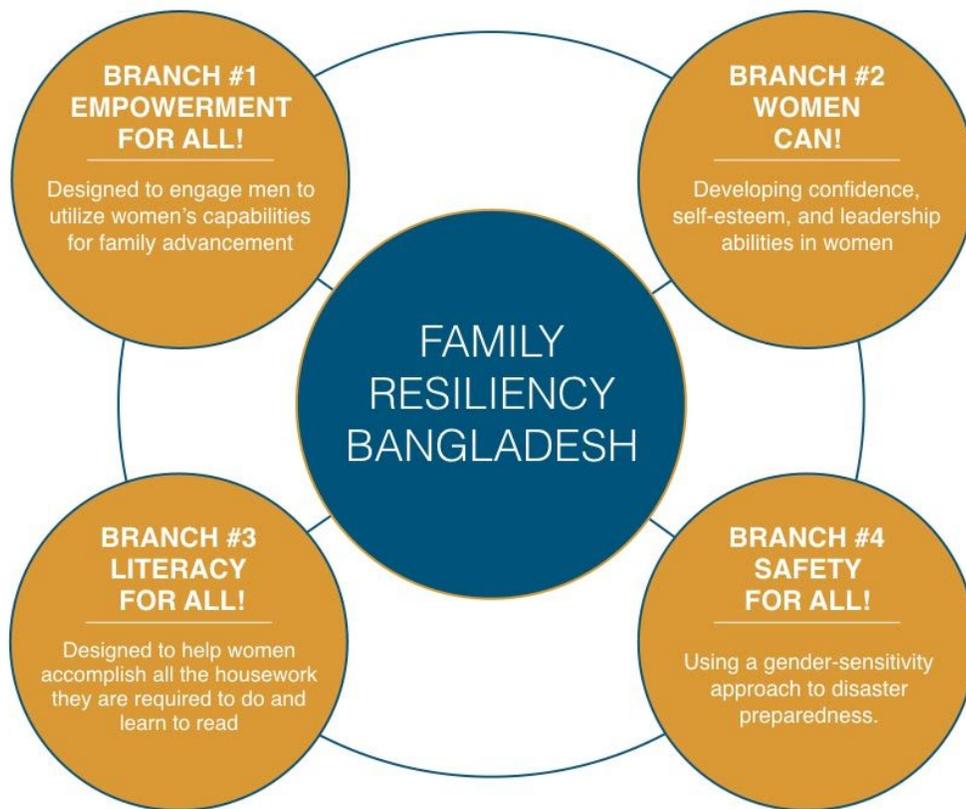
Below we discuss our programming suggestions in greater detail.

PROGRAMMING SUGGESTION #1: FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH

The goal of *FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH* is to support and foster the quickest solutions for the day-to-day problems in Bangladesh that are easily implementable on a grassroots level. We believe empowering women is this solution.

FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH would be designed to give women the tools to be leaders of their communities, teach them innovative ways to manage household chores and disaster preparedness, and support their literacy. This program would also address the issue of engaging men in women's empowerment and turning them into advocates.

The program prototype design is as follows:



Below we will take you through the goals and structure of each programming branch and share examples of similar programs making an impact around the world.

BRANCH #1 - EMPOWERMENT FOR ALL!

According to IDA (2017): “No country, community, or economy can achieve its potential or meet the challenges of the 21st century without the full and equal participation of women and men, girls and boys. Failure to fully unleash women’s productive potential represents a major missed opportunity, with significant consequences for individuals, families, and economies.”

In patriarchal societies, men determine the course of a woman’s life (Alamgir, 2014). Studies show that when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. Their families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase, communities become more resilient (Start With Women, n.d). In order to make real, lasting positive impact on women in Bangladesh, men must see the value of empowering women and the benefits to themselves and their communities.

Blocking men out of women’s empowerment interventions leads men to feeling as if something is happening behind their backs, that their authority, which has been instilled in them as a cultural, religious, and society value, is being challenged, and that their way of life is being questioned. Including men in the conversation allows the space for these real concerns to be addressed and provides the platform for open dialogue to finding solutions that work for everyone.

Therefore, we recommend the EMPOWERMENT FOR ALL! branch of the FAMILY RESILIENCY program. These classes would be designed to engage with men on women’s empowerment, allow them a safe space to address concerns and confusions they might have about what it means for them, and truly begin to see the benefits to them and their families to have their wives, daughters, and mothers be empowered.

Through the courses in this program, men would be able to see real facts and figures about the impacts empowering women could have on their family, such as these facts from CARE (2014) and UN Women (2015):

- The intervention that made the biggest impact on decreasing child stunting was women’s empowerment, even above food aid
- An increase in female labour force participation results in faster economic growth
- For every one additional year of education for women of reproductive age, child mortality decreases 9.5%
- In closing the employment participation gap and wage gap, women’s income would increase by 76%, a global value of \$17 trillion

Research shows that while men are initially resistant to the idea of women’s empowerment, once beneficial outcomes to the lives of the children in the family were seen, opposition eased (*Women’s Empowerment, 2014*).

The Men’s Engagement Program, developed in Afghanistan by Women for Women International, initially showed that 80% of male participants believed women should tolerate domestic violence to keep the family together. This number fell to 20% by the end of the program with 39% of participants having taken action to share the information they learned with their communities.

In a CARE program in Madagascar, parents were taught information about the economic impact and social benefits of education for both boys and girls. After the class, there was a 3.5% increase in enrollment, showing again, that once benefit to the family and community are explained, participants take action to make change. (CARE, *Reaching New Heights*, 2012)

In Vietnam, women who received micro-loans and made money outside the home received support from their husbands as they could see the immediate financial impact of their wives working and making money.

According to CARE USA President and CEO, Helene Gayle (2013): “The men in the communities where we work understand better than anyone that empowerment for women and girls is not a zero-sum game. They see in their home and communities what we see around the world; that when you empower a girl or a woman, she becomes a catalyst, creating ripples of positive change that lift up everyone around her; including boys and men.”

CHALLENGES OF ENGAGING MEN

At the same time that CARE and other organizations have had great success, there is much to be learned about how best to engage men in the developing world in a way that keeps them from feeling threatened or that their whole way of life is being pulled out from underneath them. To be sure, these are real concerns that would need to be addressed.

CARE’s Strategic Impact Inquiry (2014), a three year evaluation of the impact of the sum of CARE’s programming on women’s empowerment and advancement, documents real consequences of empowering women in countries where men feared they had everything to lose as well as solutions to overcome these challenges.

In Mali, for example, where CARE offers microfinance to women, men responded negatively to the changing roles of women compared to their own struggles to act as providers for the household. Men in Uganda had the same fear and additionally were concerned that women would no longer listen to men, would become proud and disrespectful. To this end, some men did not give their wives permission to attend the classes. In some cases domestic violence increased or men ended up dominating groups and controlling any micro-loans women were given. In Vietnam, male participants found that their heightened sensitivity to gender led to tensions in their families and communities.

In their study, CARE found three specific interrupters to men’s disinterest and aggression towards women’s empowerment:

- 1) **Point of Entry:** Women’s empowerment programs that were most successful in achieving support of men in communities involved initiatives that were couched as community projects, such as developing a sanitation system in Nigeria. The best entry points were nonpolitical, did not challenge “the powerful”, and served to benefit the majority of households within the community.
- 2) **Create Space for Discussion on Male and Female Sexuality:** It was important to create a space for men (and women) to discuss the pressures they feel as men and their own beliefs about women. It was also important to make sure the leaders of these programs went through the same training in order to lead effectively. Approaches to discussing these topics included individual peer-to-peer work with youth in and out of schools, home visits to improve couple communication, and interactive theatre, radio and other public events.

- 3) **Supporting Alternate Role Models:** Men who were champions of change needed additional support to continue the work they were doing, especially with backlash from the community in many cases. In Burundi, staff developed an initiative called “Abatangamuco” (those who bring light). These men were storytellers who shared how changing their attitudes towards women changed their lives for the better. In this way, men had a safe space to talk about how their lives were changing without feeling ostracized by the community.

Finding unique points of entry and ways to support men in communities so they see the potential of women’s empowerment is key to the movement. It is also key to find male leaders who will run this program and be advocates of change.

ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVING MEN IN WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

In addition to programs and initiatives mentioned above, [CARE’s](#) core program in Bangladesh is SHOUHARDO (Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities) and is aimed at giving women the skills, knowledge, and confidence to impact her and her family’s health and economic standings. Each village involved in the program has a Village Development Committee (VDC) which is made up of six men and five women. This near-parity representation is important as it allows a healthy dialogue between male and female members to take place, including issues of gender equity, facilitated by the gender training the groups receive. Women can bring their issues to any member of the VDC and know they will be heard and respected.

With more than 20 years of on-the-ground experience working with women in countries affected by conflict, [Women for Women International](#) brings comprehensive programming that addresses the social and economic empowerment of marginalized women. As part of their programming, they have developed programming to teach men about the value and importance of women’s empowerment. WFWI has trained more than 15,000 men in the most rural and isolated communities in Afghanistan, Iraq, the DRC, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Sudan and Kosovo. In classes led by local male trainers, men learn and explore ideas of gender and violence using strategies such as role-play, reflective sharing, and small group discussions. Together, they talk about sensitive issues like masculinity, gender-based division of labor, and their role in preventing violence against women and girls. WFWI also focuses on enrolling male leaders of communities, men that other men look up to and take advice from.

The core program developed by [UN WOMEN](#) to engage men in the empowerment of women is [HeForShe](#). HeForShe developed IMPACT 10x10x10, a program that engages governments, corporations and universities around the world to drive change from the top. For more grassroots activity, individuals and groups can download action kits with plans to engage men at the local level, with ideas such as film screenings, reading suggestions, and discussion topics. UN Women has engaged actor-filmmaker-singer Farhan Akhtar as its South Asia Goodwill Ambassador. In his new role, Farhan will dedicate his efforts to the empowerment of women and girls, and will serve as an advocate for UN Women’s newly launched HeForShe initiative in advocating for gender equality. Projects UN Women have initiated that engage men include:

- In Rwanda, nearly 3,000 local leaders have been educated and engaged to fight gender-based violence by promoting the concept of “positive masculinity”.
- In Fiji, street workers and the homeless are raising awareness and halting violence against women in public spaces, while more than 700 students and teachers are working to transform attitudes in 63 schools across Fiji.

- In Mozambique, classes were taught to men on domestic activities to promote gender equality and address violence against women and girls. At least 1,600 men have taken part in the course, complemented by a series of awareness-raising activities.

For another inspiring example of what is possible when men are agents of change for the empowerment of women, we look to [Bunker Roy's Barefoot College](#), a very successful non-formal training that teaches specifically women, often illiterate women, how to make solar panels. In this way, for the past 40 years, Barefoot College has created an army of female solar engineers in 1300 villages, in 80 developing countries, giving these communities access to safe and reliable energy and clean water.

In the documentary about the college, [Solar Mama](#) (2013), Raouf H. Dabbas, Senior Advisor of the Ministry of Environment in Jordan, can be seen as a champion of women's empowerment and education. He is able to convince the husband of a student to give permission for her to attend the school. As a man of position, the husband looked up to him, took his advice, and therefore, the wife was able to attend the college and bring solar energy to her community. It is a highly inspiring documentary, one we recommend watching to experience what is at stake for women in developing countries and what is possible when they are supported by men.

BRANCH #2 - WOMEN CAN!

According to one study (Parveen, 2007), “Women’s powerlessness arises from their illiteracy, lack of awareness, poor knowledge and skills and also from their lack of self-esteem and confidence.” Raised in a culture that sees women as second-class citizens, it only makes sense that this is the viewpoint many women in Bangladesh have of themselves. To combat this, we suggest self-esteem, confidence, and leadership classes we are calling WOMEN CAN!.

Along with confidence and self-esteem, WOMEN CAN! would exist to teach and instill within women life skills such as interpersonal and communication skills, flexibility, resourcefulness, managing emotions, mediation and more. Skills that make strong, vocal, proactive leaders and build cohesive communities that work. The goal of the program would be to develop women as influential decision-makers in all areas of their home life including health and well-being, economic advancement, and education of the whole family.

WOMEN CAN! could be developed as weekly or bi-weekly classes that would meet for several months, incorporating both in and out of class assignments, arts, and group talk therapy. WOMEN CAN! would be created as a safe space for women to discuss anything and everything, where no matter a woman’s background, literacy, education, or income, she would recognize, appreciate, and be able to express her own value. The courses could also redefine the viewpoint of work women do inside the home, not as a way to keep women in the home, but rather give them a renewed sense of pride, importance, and awareness of how skilled they are to be able to do all that they do. Once women have completed these courses, a possible next step could be to enroll them into existing programs that focus on economic advancement and entrepreneurship.

As was the case with one woman from CARE’s SHOUHARDO women’s empowerment program and another who was educated at Barefoot College in India, once these women saw their own potential, saw the real possibilities that existed for themselves and their families, this empowerment and inspiration trickled down into their communities, positively impacting, inspiring, and influencing women who had not had the opportunity to take part in these programs. (*Reaching New Heights*, 2012; *Solar Mamas*, 2013) We would hope for the same level of trickle-down impact within communities where WOMEN CAN! is set up.

To fully implement WOMEN CAN!, we suggest incorporating child care into the design of the program in order to give women the ability to focus completely on the task at hand. We discuss child care below in more detail in the section on literacy.

To find programming that focused on leadership, confidence, and self-esteem, we found inspiration and ideas from programming for youth, which we see as an easy crossover for older participants. Many programs we found around women’s empowerment focused on economic advancement.

INSPIRATION FOR WOMEN CAN! COURSES

Four organizations making an impact in Bangladesh are CARE, The Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center, Youth Power in Social Action, and the Bangladesh Youth Empowerment Society.

[CARE’s](#) extensive programming is extremely successful and impactful. Their main program in Bangladesh is called SHOUHARDO (Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development

Opportunities) and is aimed at giving women the skills, knowledge, and confidence to impact her and her family's health and economic standings.

The main branch of SHOUHARDO is referred to as EKATA (Empowerment Knowledge and Transformative Action) which are highly effective classes geared towards lifting the veil of how women see themselves as they have been told they are through the filter of the patriarchy. Women learn about their rights, begin to see the restrictions that have been placed on them, and begin to develop personas of the kind of woman they would like to become and develop a plan to make it happen.

[The Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center's](#) five branches of leadership development are customized to equip youth with leadership skills and enable them to have high impact in public, private, and civil sectors. The branches include 3-4 day workshops and 10 week seminars customized for university students as well as students ages 12-16.

[Young Power in Social Action](#) envisions a society without poverty, where everyone's basic needs and rights are ensured. YPSA exists to participate with the poor and vulnerable population with a commitment to bring about their own and society's sustainable development. They have an impressive and extensive assortment of programming to meet these goals including a Leadership Development Program that builds youth up as agents for change and Youth Empowerment Through Skills Centers where youth learn self-reliance and vocational skills.

Also in Bangladesh, through the [Bangladesh Youth Empowerment Society](#), young people can take courses on public speaking and storytelling as well as workshops in creative writing and bridging the gap between their thoughts and storytelling.

Outside of Bangladesh, [Reach Out to Asia's](#) extensive and far-reaching programming positively impacts youth all over Asia and the Middle East. Their youth empowerment programs include clubs, conferences, four-day trainings, innovative education initiatives, and sports.

[READ Centers](#) offer women and girls in South Asia a safe space to gather, learn, and advocate. Often, women in this area of the world must ask permission from their husbands to leave home for reasons other than child care or farm work. But because libraries are viewed as safe, neutral places, women can go to READ Centers independently to access literacy, livelihood skills, and technology training, as well as specialized educational resources. This helps women build their confidence and decision-making power. Along with literacy courses, READ also offers:

- Leadership development: Trainings in confidence building and civic participation equip women with skills to become leaders in their families and communities.
- Women's and family health: READ Centers provide specialized health information and workshops for women, including family planning and sexual and reproductive health.
- Gender sensitization: Training and focus group discussions on gender norms and women's legal rights are offered for both men and women.
- Women's groups: Self-help groups, savings cooperatives, and reading groups give women the chance to meet, discuss, and learn new skills. All READ Centers have women-led sub-committees to help manage programs and resources.

For the past 25 years, [Tostan](#), has been empowering communities in eight African countries to bring about sustainable development and positive social transformation based on respect for human rights. One of their main programs, the Community Empowerment Program, consists of two classes, one for

adolescents and one for adults, of 25-30 people. The classes meet three times per week for several months to discuss human rights and personal and communal responsibility, utilizing formal and nonformal education and training techniques, such as storytelling, to maximize inclusivity.

Founded in 1992 and working in 33 African countries, the [Forum For African Women Educationalists](#) empowers girls and women through gender-responsive education. FAWE has developed groups for girls to develop life skills, learn about reproductive health and provide guidance and counseling for girls. They also have a Mothers' Club that bands mothers in communities together to enhance girls' access, retention and performance in school. [Tuseme](#), a FAWE program, has used theatre, song, and the creative arts to train girls to identify and understand problems that affect them, hinder their education, articulate these problems, and take action to solve them. Girls learn negotiation skills, how to speak out, self-confidence, decision-making and leadership.

[Advancing Girls' Education In Africa](#) supports girls to attend and graduate from public secondary schools in Malawi and even go on to pursue higher education or employment opportunities. Young women are set up with apprenticeships and can participate, through their schools, in a 2-year long leadership course. AGE's programs have benefited 500 girls and young women annually since 2006.

BRANCH #3 - LITERACY FOR ALL

According to a UNICEF survey done in Bangladesh from 2012-2013, literacy was defined by either being able to read a short simple statement about everyday life or if a person attended secondary education or higher. According to this study, 85% of women in Bangladesh, ages 15-24, are literate. For all women above the age of 15, the literacy drops down to 58%. As of 2015, the literacy rate of all men and women in Bangladesh is 61%. (World Bank, 2015; Pathey, 2015)

What is inspiring about these numbers is that while all women over the age of 15 have a lower literacy rate, the high literacy rate of the women ages 15-24 means the government's initiative to promote young girls attending secondary school is working. And, it also means that women of all ages, who were not able to attend secondary school need an innovative way to learn how to read.

The goal of this third branch of *FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH* is LITERACY FOR ALL!, to teach women to read while at the same time addressing the housework time poverty issue they experience. This branch would also find new ways of engaging everyone in the community on the importance of literacy and teaching about the impacts it can have on the lives of families.

Below are examples of literacy programs pulled from both adult programs and youth programs that could be modified for an older audience.

LITERACY ORGANIZATIONS

In India, researchers connected with [Pratham](#) to study the effects of improving household education by educating the mother. They developed courses using Pratham's community-based classes for children and had mothers meet with volunteer teachers two hours a day, six days a week, in the villages where the women lived. They also trained the women on how to help their children with their schoolwork. This intervention was lead by paid staff of Pratham. Staff would visit the homes of the women in the program once a week. They found that the interventions resulted in statistically-significant improvements in the mother's language scores as well as the experience of her own empowerment. (Banerji, Berry, and Shotland, 2015)

In Bangladesh, [SIL International](#) has introduced adult literacy programs for people who have dropped out of school early or never had a chance to attend and are now beyond the age of formal education. The eight-month course in the national language develops learners' numeracy skills as well as teaches them to read and write.

With [UNICEF'S Girl for Girl Program](#) in Benin, sixth and seventh grade girls act as mentors and tutors to girls in the first through third grades. Mentors visit the girls in their homes, help with homework, and talk to them about their difficulties at home and at school.

[The HerStory Campaign](#), launched by LitWorld and Global G.L.O.W., fosters literacy and provides mentorship for girls around the globe. Working side-by-side with teams of women and girls in local communities, HerStory uses storytelling and the arts to empower learning and support girls in pursuing their hopes and dreams.

In Zambia, [The Lubuto Library's](#) mentor program works in tangent with their arts programming and is a blend of personal story sharing of Zambian culture and one-to-one counseling. Other activities include story readings, educational games, children's rights, singing and dancing.

Working in 24 countries, [LitWorld](#) uses both adult mentor relationships as well as peer-to-peer mentoring. The program brings together 10-15 children, ages 10-14, twice a week for two hours after school for joyful learning, creative play, and social interaction. They also have a full-time mentoring program that runs when school is not in session.

FINDING TIME FOR LITERACY - A WOMAN'S CHALLENGE

Women in Bangladesh are responsible for almost all the housework including water and firewood gathering, laundry, cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Women spend at least 2.5 times more time than men on this kind of unpaid care and domestic work that is essential to life and makes any other work possible but remains largely invisible (*Women's Economic Rights, n.d.*). This kind of work leaves little time for women to learn to read.

Since many jobs, such as childcare and laundry, are done simultaneously, it is easy to underestimate the amount of time women actually spend on housework. When all work inside and outside the household, including childcare, is summed, women in Bangladesh spend ten hours working per day. Cooking and washing utensils requires an average of four hours per day.

In particular, water gathering, specifically a female task, can take anywhere from 40 minutes to two to four hours a day, some women walking as far as four miles a day to complete this task (Jain, 2015; Bagri, 2017; Nunn, 2017).

This necessary work that women are doing is often seen as doing “nothing” all day. Even women themselves do not acknowledge the amount of work they are doing. This expected unpaid women's work is often taken for granted (Kidder, Zahria & Ortega, 2014).

When women are spending time doing chores, they are spending less time on educating themselves and their children and less time on economic activities that would make a difference for themselves and their families. According to Melinda Gates (Khazan, 2016), reducing women's unpaid labor from five hours per day to three can increase a country's female labor-force participation rate by 10 percent. If women participated in the economy at the same levels as men, global GDP could increase by 12%.

We believe providing women with ways to save time on housework and combining it with literacy classes could be just the solution needed. Below we discuss ways to ease the burden of housework by looking at organizations and companies providing solutions for women in the areas of water collecting, laundry, and child care.

IDEAS TO INNOVATE HOUSEWORK IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

[Rebuilding South Sudan's](#) “Literacy at the Well” program provides literacy for women and girls who wait in long lines to fill buckets with water. The organization was founded to provide support for the lost boys of South Sudan whose parents had been killed in the genocide of the area. However, when they visited a school, they saw that women who were waiting to collect water would wait in the school instead of out in the sun. They saw an additional opportunity and developed this literacy program for women and girls. The program costs \$4,000 per year per village which includes training for teachers, annual salary, and supplies. Women are able to take what they learned back to their homes and share with family members and neighbors (Dwyer, W. n.d.).

A company that has made big advancements in water gathering in developing countries is [Hippo Roller](#). A hippo roller is a water collecting device that is much larger than traditional water vases or buckets. It can hold 5x times more water than a single bucket. The rollers, attached to a long handle, simply roll along the ground. They have been very effective in transforming how women gather water in the developing world. Women in Bangladesh typically use a traditional kolski vase which is not very large. Using a device like this would eliminate the need for multiple trips to gather water and would physically be much easier. Libraries in Bangladesh could fund a certain amount of hippo rollers and partner it with literacy or one of the empowerment programs mentioned above.

There are several companies with similar products that include [SafeSIPP](#) (which purifies water as well as acting as a water carrier), Wello's [Water Wheel](#), and [QDrum](#).

An effective laundry solution rolled out in Peru is called [GiraDora](#), a human-powered washing machine that is cheap, portable and easy to use. It is a plastic tub tall enough to sit on. Once seated, the user presses the foot pedals to move the mechanics inside for cleaning clothing as well as ringing out water after washing. The foot pedal leaves the users hands free for other activities, such as reading. The cost of this device is about US \$40. There are multiple opportunities for libraries to invest in such a device. Similar to above, the library could purchase a certain amount of pedal washing machines as an added incentive for women to attend literacy training. Additionally, women could purchase the machines from the library using micro-credit and create a laundry business.

Taking inspiration from **Our Little Village** in Oregon, a possible service offered could be child care. Babysitters could be college students who are interested in child development and could be paid or possibly this service could be provided in exchange for college credit or to meet internship requirements. Additionally, older high school students could act as babysitters, blending a literacy program for women with confidence and skill building for youths.

ADDITIONAL WAYS TO ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY ON LITERACY

Along with implementing literacy programs, the Bangladesh Library system could promote the importance of literacy by developing a **literacy awareness campaign** that could be rolled out on either a local or national level. This type of campaign could last for a month or it could be an open-ended project. Outreach could include commercials on the radio and television, ads on buses, and text campaigns as well as more on the ground awareness activities such as a literacy parade, as was done in India in the 90's, where politicians and celebrities, both men and women, had the opportunity to speak on the importance of literacy. (Comings, Smith, & Shrestha, 1995)

Libraries could hold **contests** for women to write short stories or poems. Contests could also focus on the idea of "communication" which would allow those who don't yet know how to write to be involved. In this way, a woman could partner with a literate person and have that person write for her while still giving her the opportunity to craft language and experience herself as a communicator and engage with words. Contest winners could be published in a special journal.

BRANCH #4 - DISASTER PREPAREDNESS FOR ALL

Women and children are particularly vulnerable during emergencies such as natural disasters, which are unfortunately a common occurrence in Bangladesh. Women's restricted decision making power and mobility puts them at increased risk of injury or death during cyclones or floods. While men are often on boats or working in cities, women are usually the ones responsible for children when disaster strikes.

Protection issues often arise after natural disasters because normal care mechanisms break down and women and children may not have the security offered by their usual shelter. These factors can put women at increased risk of violence, rape, abuse and trafficking (*Women and Girls in Bangladesh, 2010*).

It is easier for men and boys to survive during a tsunami because they have been taught to swim and climb trees and they have been given proper disaster preparedness training. Women do not have access to this same information, often feeling like they cannot make decisions without the permission of their husbands.

Additionally, women are restricted by their clothes. The extra fabric of the sari can easily get caught by passing debris and in some cases women's clothing was ripped off of them by water and debris and rather than be seen naked, they stayed put and drowned (*Disaster and Gender Statistics, n.d; Collins et al, 2009*).

The goal of this branch of *FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH* would be to ensure that all members of the family have attended disaster preparedness training including CPR and basic first aid training, know how to swim, climb trees, know which shelter they are to meet at, that women have permission to wear their hair and saris in ways that are safe during a disaster, and that they are allowed to make life and death decisions for themselves and their children when the men are not around.

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS PROGRAMS

Examples of disaster preparedness programs that incorporate a gender sensitivity training element include:

[Give2Asia](#) develops educational materials and provide training to build capacity among women, children, and the elderly to cope with climate change impacts and hydrological hazards. They ensure that storm management information is available to women instead of only the male population. They also create options for alternative livelihoods that do not rely on geological resources such as tailoring.

[CARE Nepal](#) created a door-to-door disaster preparedness campaign as well as a disaster skills fair where women learned post-disaster cooking techniques and first aid.

Also in Nepal, [MercyCorp](#) has taught women flood-plan management such as constructing barriers along river banks, how to build bridges to evacuate flood prone areas, and how to build pit latrines.

In Laos, the [United Nations Development Program](#), spent 18 months training men and women who were part of the areas Village Disaster Management Committee.

[Tear Fund](#) in Bangladesh teaches communities, including women, how to work together to survive a disaster. They also teach women in Bangladesh how to tie their hair and saris up in such a way that they will not get in the way during a disaster.

The primary goal of [The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society's](#) Vulnerability to Resilience Program focuses on ensuring women, children, the elderly, and disabled received special attention during times of disaster.

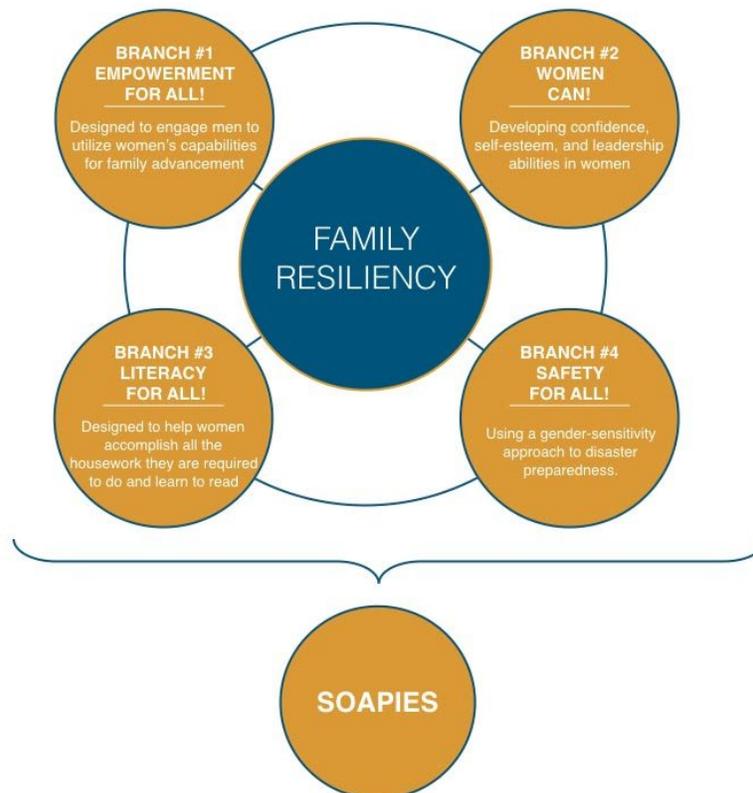
[The Centre For Injury Prevention And Research, Bangladesh](#) is a world-leading injury prevention organization based in Bangladesh. Through pioneering research and innovation, CIPRB saves lives by delivering quality programmes throughout Bangladesh, designed to combat injury-based fatalities and morbidities, including drownings, burns, maternal health issues, and road traffic injuries. Their programs include [Project Bhasa](#), focused on teaching swimming to children, as well as CPR classes for adolescents. Pulling from this kind of programming, women could learn to swim and perform CPR as well.

PROGRAM #2: THE SOAPIE

A very effective and impactful way to connect with individuals and communities is by creating media content that excites them and is easy to gain access to. One entertainment genre that has been very successful in creating widespread, positive impact in developing nations is what is known as the “socially conscious” soap opera. These take the typical soap opera format, with all the drama, backstabbing, plots twists, and love triangles, and add in educational, social messaging such as financial literacy, ending violence against women, child marriage, new business development and the like. It is what is called edutainment. By placing characters in situations not uncommon to the audience, producers of this kind of programming hope viewers will think twice before, say, spending money on alcohol rather than on life saving medicine. By working through the guise of fictional third party characters, soap operas can broach issues that would otherwise be taboo, such as unwanted pregnancy or AIDS.

According to a 2012-2013 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF, out of 55,000 sampled households, 20% from urban areas and 80% from rural areas, 37% had a television while 86% had a cell phone. As of 2015, cell phone usage in Bangladesh surpassed 130 million users and coverage is stated to be at 90% (Pathey, 2015; Whyte & Lin, 2010, p. 115; *Bangladesh Infrastructure*, 2004). Cell phones effectively reduce the “distance” between individuals and institutions, making the sharing of information and knowledge easier and more effective. Mobile telephones have been a “dream come true” for rural areas where connectivity to the outside world has been made so easy. In countries such as Bangladesh, with high rural population densities, mobile phones have quickly become much more cost-effective for telecommunication. (*Mobile Telephony*, 2011)

This brings us to the “SOAPIE”.



Soapies are 2-5 minute soap operas delivered via cell phone technology either as text or videos or a call-in radio show. Some soapies include social messaging in scripts while others are purely for entertainment. With the spread of mobile technology through Bangladesh, over 44% of women have a cell phone with SMS technology (Kamrul & Slack, 2016), a unique entertainment/education opportunity presents itself: to develop, produce, and deliver socially conscious soapies influenced by content from the programming of *FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH*.

Sample characters and storylines could include:

- A male political figure who spreads the word of female equality and empowerment in Bangladesh
- A woman from a nearby village who has just started the WOMEN CAN! program
- A young woman who works at the library and teaches the community how to read
- A young man who works for a disaster preparedness organization

Characters would interact with each other either through being family members, coworkers, or connected as friends. Along with learning about the jobs of each character, we would get to know their personal lives, what they struggle with, and see how they are able to influence their communities on the issues connected to *FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH*.

We recommend weaving gender equality into the production itself by ensuring scripts deal with both female and male storylines, ensuring background actors are both female and male, hiring production team that are at least 50% female and ensuring that females are at least 50% of the leadership and management team. It would also be important to hire women to work on the marketing and outreach aspects of such programming as well as finding female engineers to guide the team through the process of connecting with audiences via smart and SMS cell phone technology.

Below we first discuss examples and outcomes of socially conscious long form televised soap operas and then give a few examples and outcomes of soapies. We then have a very brief discussion about complementary content and the idea of a library edutainment app.

SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS SOAP OPERAS & THEIR IMPACT

The [Soul City Institute for Social Justice](#) uses a combination of mass media, social mobilisation and advocacy to improve the lives of young women & girls and the communities they live in. They exist to ensure that young women & girls have equal access to resources that enable them to self-actualise, reach their full potential, and take their rightful place in society. They promote a just society and equal treatment and respect for basic human rights.

They produce one of South Africa's most beloved televised soap operas, [Soul City It's Real](#), which has had 12 seasons since 1994. Viewership of the series is over 12 million. Set in the fictional Soul City Township, *Soul City* mirrors the social and development challenges faced by poor communities everywhere. It weaves health and social issues into real-life stories for the millions of people who have grown to trust the powerful messages of this very popular programme.

Topics *Soul City It's Real* has covered include: Mother and Child health, Immunisation, Breast Feeding, Infant Nutrition, Safe Motherhood, Child Abuse, Housing and Land, Violence Awareness, Sexual Harassment, Rape, Micro-Credit for Personal Financing, Small Business Development, and much more.

It was found that regular viewers were almost four times as likely to use condoms than those who did not watch the show at all (Bansal, 2012). In an episode that aired in 1999 that dealt with violence against women, there was correlation between those who watched the show and an awareness of knowledge of about the realities of violence against women and a questioning of whether it should be allowed to happen or not. There was an 11% increase in men who thought that women did not deserve to be beaten. This episode also contributed to an act against domestic violence being passed (*Soul City, n.d.*).

[*Scandal!*](#) is a South African television soap opera produced by Ochre Media about the people who work for the fictitious Johannesburg-based newspaper, The Voice. Storylines revolve around tight deadlines, the chaos of breaking news, the fight for increased circulation, and how spend to their private lives and personal angst. The core social message of *Scandal!* is financial literacy. In one character arc, it was discovered that a woman had a gambling problem and was deeply in debt. As the story continued, she was able to get help and get out of debt. As a result of seeing storylines like this, viewers were almost twice as likely to borrow from formal sources, less likely to engage in gambling, and less prone to enter hire purchase agreements (Savonitto & Wagh, 2013; Basaninyenzi, U. 2013).

Premiering in 2007, the Kenyan-based televised soap opera, [*Makutano Junction*](#), deals with contemporary issues such as corruption, education, early marriages, female genital mutilation and pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, human rights, social justice, values and perceptions, conflict resolution. The story is set on a fictional village named Makutano. The season was 13, 30 minute episodes. Partnering with Institute of Education, Just Ideas, and teachers across the UK, the series was used in primary and secondary classrooms for a Global Learning initiative.

SOAPIES

With a grant from the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey, a nurse at Rutgers's University created the socially conscious soapie [*A Story about Toni, Mike, and Valerie*](#) to promote HIV sexual risk reduction in young urban women. In one study on the effectiveness of the video, it was found that there was statistically significant reduction in stereotypical gender views and viewers believed it would help women handle themselves with a male partner who wanted to have unprotected sex when she did not want to. The majority of the sample viewers found the characters to be relatable. (Jones, 2008)

In 2008, Ochre Moving Pictures released 40 episodes of a soapie called [*SoLikeLife*](#). With sponsorship from Nokia and Vodafone, it was the story of relationships, aspirations and dramas as experienced by a group of twenty-somethings living the frenetic Jozi lifestyle. Vodafone made this content free to their 1.7 million customers.

Other soapies that made an impact in the genre were the Dutch show *Young South*, which premiered in 2003 and garnered a viewership of 50,000 and the Australian soapie, *Random Place*, which premiered in 2005. Both these shows helped lay the groundwork for the technology as well as the format (*Soaps Slip Into Phones, 2005*).

ADDITIONAL SOAPIE INSPIRATIONS

A great example of short form content that has made an impact but that wasn't released via cell phone is the short video [*A Woman's Life in Bangladesh*](#), produced by The Hunger Project. In it, we see a woman in Bangladesh whose husband has cast her out for eating rice when she was not supposed to. Distraught, she goes back home to live with her mother and considers suicide. However, her friend

brings her to a women's empowerment class and the woman sees there is another path. This is an example of the kind of effective content a Bangladesh library soapie could produce.

[Aponjon](#), created by USAID's Mobile Alliance for Maternal Action (MAMA), supports pregnant women, new mothers and their families by sending them behavior change communication messages via mobile phone. With over 190,000 subscribers, 20% of them receiving the service for free, women receive information regarding their health and the health of their child in time with the progression of their pregnancy and the growth of the child post-birth. The messages sent are text messages, as opposed to video, but Aponjon is an example of an effective mobile messaging program that reaches women.

COMPLIMENTARY EDUTAINMENT CONTENT IDEAS

As we continue to research and develop the ideas of a Bangladeshi soapie, something to consider is the creation of additional value-added programming such as:

- After the show talkbacks with directors, writers, actors, producers and experts on that episode's social issue
- Talk shows or docu-series that explore similar issues from a more journalistic as opposed to storytelling standpoint
- Radio segments with talent and experts
- Live events that discuss issues from episodes in person with talent from the show, experts, and fans

A LIBRARY EDUTAINMENT APP

Should this be a direction the library system in Bangladesh wants to go, another exciting avenue to connect with library patrons would be to develop a library edutainment app. This app could house the soapies, any tangential content such as talkbacks or talk shows, as well content that could be developed men, boys, and girls.

Developed in Nigeria in 2011 with initial funding from Google Android Sub Saharan Challenge, [Afrinolly](#) users can watch African movies, trailers, and short films. The app is available for free on most smartphones and java-enabled phones. Afrinolly has been downloaded by over 4 million users.

NEXT STEPS ON SOAPIE PROGRAMMING

Should this programming be a direction your organization would like to go, next steps would include a full inquiry into the technology and delivery of soapies via cell phone technology with a clear outline of how the technology would work for smartphones and those with only SMS capabilities.

CONCLUSION

In researching innovative ways to engage and positively impact women in Bangladesh through the library system, we discovered challenges and obstacles women face every day that include living in an oppressive, gender biased culture, high illiteracy rates, being tied down by labor intensive housework, and lacking disaster preparedness skills.

To combat these obstacles and match the reputation libraries have as being a place where families can learn and grow together, we have recommended developing programs for women's empowerment that are couched within a family empowerment context. To this end, we have suggested two programs: FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH and SOAPIES.

FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH would exist to engage men on the issue of women's empowerment and transform them into advocates, instill confidence and self-esteem in women, teach women literacy while freeing them up from the burden of housework, and ensure that all family members are educated and able to take action when disaster strikes.

Along with these on-the-ground, face-to-face interventions, we also recommended a unique form of edutainment called a SOAPIE. Using cell phone technology, the library soapie would be able to connect with a much wider audience, spreading the initiatives of FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH farther, faster. Content of the soapies would be influenced directly from the content of FAMILY RESILIENCY BANGLADESH programming.

We believe these interventions would have a positive impact on women in Bangladesh, providing them not only the permission but the space with which to embrace their own empowerment, value, and strength. In doing this, we believe it will impact the empowerment, value, and strength of Bangladesh as a nation.

To end, we would like to share a brief discussion on an additional unique finding that came up in our research: the changing role of librarians in the 21st century. Taking this into consideration brings the opportunity of a possible, necessary first step before implementing any library programming.

A POSSIBLE STEP ONE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF LIBRARIANS

If the goal is to transform Bangladesh through the transformation of its women, the first thing to transform would be the people leading and developing these programs. As luck would have it, our findings matched our intuition as redefining the role of 21st century librarians has been a topic of interest for many for quite some time.

Libraries are no longer viewed as only spaces where people work but rather they are turning into spaces where, yes work happens, but so does innovation, art, conversations, community, and empowerment.

Once librarians were considered serious, unfun bookworms, they are now looked upon to be leaders of innovative programming, leading the charge for real change within their communities and acting as role-models for all youth in the community to look up to and learn from.

Additionally, librarians would need gender-sensitivity training to learn the language of women's empowerment, become knowledgeable on the issues women face, and to ensure that their values did not clash with the values of any women's empowerment program that would be developed and delivered.

Our recommendation is to develop a training program for librarians that trains them to embrace this new community leadership role to ensure the effectiveness and impact of delivering women's empowerment programming.

We hope the programming we have suggested assists you in making decisions on where to place resources and energy in regards to the women of Bangladesh and their families.

LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS

EMPOWERMENT

[Advancing Girls' Education In Africa](#)
[Bangladesh Youth Empowerment Society](#)
[The Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center](#)
[Barefoot College](#)
[CARE - ENGAGING MEN](#)
[CARE - SHOUHARDO](#)
[Forum For African Women Educationalists](#)
[HeForShe](#)
[Reach Out to Asia](#)
[READ Centers](#)
[Tostan](#)
[Tuseme](#)
[UN WOMEN](#)
[Women for Women International](#)
[Young Power in Social Action](#)

LITERACY

[The HerStory Campaign](#)
[GiraDora](#)
[Hippo Roller](#)
[LitWorld](#)
[The Lubuto Library](#)
[Pratham](#)
[Our Little Village](#)
[Rebuilding South Sudan](#)
[SIL International](#)

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

[The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society](#)
[CARE Nepal](#)
[Give2Asia](#)
[MercyCorp](#)
[Project Bhasa](#)
[Tear Fund](#)
[United Nations Development Program](#)

SOAPIES

[Aponjon](#)
[Makutano Junction](#)
[Scandal!](#)
[SoLikeLife](#)
[Soul City Institute for Social Justice](#)
[Soul City It's Real](#)
[A Story about Toni, Mike, and Valerie](#)
[A Woman's Life in Bangladesh](#)

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