

A case for women-only rural markets

Rural markets to be run by women for a few hours in a week can go a long way in helping alleviate rural poverty as well as create women entrepreneurs, writes **Khurshed Alam**

BANGLADESH'S is still a rural economy where 78 per cent of the population lives in the villages. The village people have their own styles of production and consumption. If we look at the countryside, it can be seen that there are thousands of markets - small (haat) and big (bazar). It is assumed that there are more than 15,000 haats-bazars in the rural areas. These haats-bazars are considered by the government to be important for rural people. The bazars are leased comparatively at high rate and come under the development scheme of the government.

The government has brought 2,100 haats-bazars for infrastructure development through 'Growth Centre Market' (GCM) programme. The GCM has been placed under the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) for infrastructure development. The prime objective is to make the market pucca (metalled) and to create other facilities like sheds, tube wells, toilets, drains, roads and buildings for selling fish, meat, vegetables, spices and other different goods. The entire market is to be made pucca so that the users can make its best use in all seasons without any hassle and the users are not required to walk through mud for buying and selling goods.

The market is connected to the main road through link roads so that the loaded trucks with goods and vans can easily travel. Presently, with the assistance of the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), most of the GCMs have been brought under the development scheme. The process is still continuing. It is hoped that development of these 2,100 growth centre markets will be completed with the stipulated time.

It is expected that the government will prepare a list of new GCMs and take some of them under the development scheme. Necessary initiatives for infrastructure development of these markets are

likely to be taken up. It may be noted that the government spends minimum Tk 3.0 million to 9.0 million for each GCM from its development fund.

Importantly, the GCMs that are developed by the government are used as weekly market. The haat sits once or twice a week. During the rest of the week, no other shop opens except some vegetable and fish shops. In the local shops, there are buying and selling throughout the week; but the volume is comparatively smaller than that of the market day. Therefore, these local shops eagerly wait for the haat-bazar day to sell their goods and products.

Currently, the government receives Tk 2.0 billion as revenue through lease of these markets. There is a market in Rajshahi that is leased at Tk 20 million. The question is how much commodities in the markets are bought and sold yearly. According to an estimate, commodities worth Tk 200 billion are sold and bought in these markets annually.

It is observed that the big infrastructure of the bazars are used only once or twice in a week. In some places, the infrastructure is used only once a week and the bazars remain idle for the rest of the week looking like playgrounds. Can we make some kind of its alternative use? This may include a day as 'Bou Bazar' (market by women) a week. The 'Bou Bazar' may be a marketplace for women where the neighbouring women will come with their goods and products; all the sellers will be women but the buyers can be both women and men.

The 'Bou Bazar' can continue from 7:00 a.m. to 12 a.m. where women will come with their produce or collected products, sell those and return home early. As a result, after going back home, they can do some important household work. There are 2,100 GCMs and if Bou Bazars sit once a week and goods/products are sold at Tk 1,00,000, there will

be Tk 2.1 million earning a week. Through this process and value chain Tk 20 million can be earned by women a week. It can contribute to poverty reduction in the village economy. It has been estimated that women can sell goods and products worth Tk 11.34 billion a year. To produce these products, each woman can use raw materials along with their labour at Tk 700-800 only.

Through the above-mentioned process, Bou Bazar can bring a rapid transformation in the village economy. There are two special promising aspects i.e. product of some women of a certain area may be recognised as brand and a woman or women's group can be developed as entrepreneur/s.

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, the government is not required to incur any cost. This can be taken up by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs or the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC). They can take local initiative and start such markets with transactions of Tk 50 -70 million or they can get it done more easily through the involvement of NGOs (non-governmental organizations). This can be done with less cost or even without any cost through the involvement of women Union Parishad members, women social workers, Upazila Parishad woman vice-chairman and the upazila women and children affairs officer.

If such a project can be designed by the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, it can be implemented easily by one woman project director. To support the project, donors like Swedish SIDA and NORAD of Norway will be much interested.

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