

Making a Difference

**Citizen's and their organisations and networks contributing to change
OWA PPA 2008-9: Case study 22**

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| Title of Case Study: | In from the Margins - Strategies for change from Dhaka's informal women workers Partnership of Women in Action, Bangladesh |
| 1. PPA partner name | One World Action |
| 2. Countries highlighted in case study | Bangladesh |

In from the Margins - Strategies for change from Dhaka's informal women workers



Partnership of Women in Action, Bangladesh

Unorganised and isolated, informal women workers across the world are often extremely poor and vulnerable. Their lack of political power and engagement in local and national political and development processes, further increases their invisibility and exclusion.

Approximately 10 million women in Bangladesh find work in the informal sector. The majority are labourers, street vendors, rag pickers, brick breakers, sex workers or domestic servants. These women share a common experience of low pay, long hours, dangerous, unregulated and unprotected working conditions, the risk of sexual harassment, inadequate shelter and health care, and the constant threat of eviction from homes and workplaces.



In response to these challenges, working women in Dhaka have developed a groundbreaking model that provides critical learning not just for Bangladesh, but for exploited women workers across the world. In 2006 the Partnership of Women in Action (PaWA) coalition was formed with support from One World Action through its Programme Partnership Agreement with DFID. PaWA

brought together five existing but fragile grassroots women's organisations working with informal women workers. PaWA has developed these organisations capacity, knowledge and ability to take collective action and all member organisations now have several thousand members, secure rented rooms and full time staff. In the last three years PaWA have transformed the lives of their members and lobbied for women workers to become visible, protected and supported.

PaWA have developed a range of different initiatives to support their members. These include human rights and literacy training, providing legal advice and support with family mediation (particularly on issues relating to violence and marriage), setting up crèches, giving information on health and government schemes and providing opportunities for women members to socialise. Inspired by a visit to the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India in 2007, PaWA has set up simple financial services so for the first time women can access credit, open bank accounts, save and take out insurance. PaWA has given its members identity cards which is an important first step in women identifying themselves as workers and accessing the benefits they are entitled to. As a result of organising, street vendors no longer pay a daily bribe to the police.

Income security will always be a priority for informal sector women however we realised that without increasing the level of social consciousness and building the capacities of our organisations, any income generating schemes would not be sustainable. So PaWA places equal weight on human rights trainings, organisational development, income generation and advocacy.
Moni Rani, Co-ordinator Dalit Women Forum

PaWA have trained their members block batik, sewing, spice grinding and candle making and provided them with equipment, materials and training in management and accounting. With these new skills women are establishing small scale businesses and starting to earn a reliable daily income.

Women workers themselves are best placed to know their solutions and so PaWA's philosophy is to accompany and empower women so they can campaign and voice their demands directly to decision makers. Bangladesh's Constitution recognises the basic rights of workers however existing labour laws are outdated, are not enforced and do not recognise informal work. PaWA are lobbying for legal frameworks, comprehensive policies and allocation of adequate budgets to support informal workers, focusing on the provision of social protection, benefits, adequate low-cost housing and health care, with special measures to support Dalit, older and disabled women. PaWA also want to see a National Social Security Act for Informal Workers, similar to the Act that was passed in India in May 2008.

Workers will continue to be isolated and invisible if they are unorganised. Organising is therefore at the heart of everything PaWA do. PaWA's integrated rights based approach and ability to combine grassroots community organising and poverty alleviation programmes, with personal empowerment and lobbying for longer term policy change has proved an effective model that has already led to positive changes for some of Dhaka's most marginalised women.



We have conducted trainings and established small scale businesses. We have also had training in human rights and literacy - women now feel able to raise their voices. I was in the dark but now I am in the light. We hope that in the future we can become a self dependent organisation and consolidate and grow - to develop skills and provide employment for members as well as campaigning for women's human rights and addressing issues of violence. We are very confident that with PaWA as an umbrella organisation we can achieve this. There is so much potential - we have many dreams and ambitions for going further.

Lovely Yasmin, Independent Children and Women Workers Forum

Background Facts

- Bangladesh is an extremely poor country and 84% of its 137 million people live on less than \$2 a day. Its economically active population is around 60 million, but unemployment and, more significantly underemployment, remain a huge problem as the economy is unable to absorb new entrants to the labour force.
- 90% of Bangladesh's labour force work in the informal sector and the contribution of the informal sector to Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product is around 40%. The informal sector is defined as economic activity that is unregulated and is not taxed, supported or monitored by the government. The current global economic crisis is further increasing the number of informal workers in vulnerable employment.
- With a population of 13 million, Dhaka is one of the world's fastest growing cities, drawing between 300-400,000 migrants every year. Some migrant women arrive with their husbands, but it is increasingly common for widowed, unmarried or divorced women to come independently to Dhaka.
- In 2009 PaWA conducted 270 interviews with informal women workers in 4 areas of Dhaka. They found that 32% had a monthly income of less than 1000 Taka (100Taka = £1), 82% had no savings, 50% were illiterate, 4% had attended secondary school, 38% lived in slums and 78% were dependent on local drug stores to meet their health care needs. Almost all women interviewed had migrated to Dhaka due to the lack of job opportunities in rural areas.
- One World Action has been working in Bangladesh since 1989 - it also works with Nagorik Uddyog, Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights and Gonoshasthaya Kendra.
- For further information about the work of PaWA see www.nuhr.org/Urban_Informal.html