

SATHI

(CASE STUDY 3)



MEET FAHMIDA AKTAR, THE GATEWAY

and one-stop solution provider of Deora

BACKGROUND

This is the story of Fahmida Aktar. She works as a Union Digital Centre (UDC) entrepreneur from Shahajadapur. She hails from Deora village of Sarail upazila in Brahmanbaria district under the Chattogram division. Fahmida offers multiple public services digitally, alongside Bank Asia's banking services and bKash's MFS services. She serves as the gateway and one-stop solution provider to Deora's residents for all major public and financial services. This made Fahmida an important voice within her community and supported her to become financially resilient.

THE JOURNEY

Fahmida's journey was filled with challenges and roadblocks. From her early days, she was known for her supportive nature. She joined the Sarail Upazila Health Complex as a nurse after completing her studies. She liked the role and actively worked there for five years. The main challenge for her was the commute to the health complex. After she got married, family responsibilities did not allow her to continue the job. Fahmida learned from her time at the health complex that financial resilience is a growing challenge in her community, especially when faced with unexpected health crises.

One day, the local chairman reached out to Fahmida with an opportunity to join as a UDC entrepreneur. The role was to offer public services digitally. It was not a salaried job, but the earnings were commission-based. Fahmida got motivated by this new challenge and happily joined. She, with a male counterpart, became focal points for all public services and started their journey in 2012.



Fahmida felt the need for banking services in her village as she could see her customers' challenges. One must visit the nearest bank, 10km away, to make payments, deposits or withdrawals. It took at least half a day to visit the nearest bank, conduct banking services, and return. This became extremely challenging for people in times of need. In 2021, the Sathi network, a platform supported by a2i, reached out to Fahmida. It is a platform dedicated to upscaling women UDC entrepreneurs. The goal was to empower women and close the gender gap in Bangladesh's financial services. Fahmida happily accepted the offer, driven by the cause.

In 2022, she received the opportunity to become a bKash and Bank Asia agent through the Sathi network. She took the offer graciously. The Sathi network held regular training sessions on capacity development. She learned an agent's detailed operations on ways to acquire and retain customers and deliver services efficiently. She saw that her customers were relieved when they conducted basic financial services in a plain and simple manner. The Sathi network helped her understand and overcome a financial services agent's key challenges. The main

challenge was to position herself as a valid and reliable source of financial services. Even after she started, people would still travel 10km to the bank branch rather than visit her. She found out that people were mostly unaware of financial services or did not trust her to deal with financial services as she was a woman. She had to prove to her community that she was equally capable of offering financial services and that it was more convenient. Fahmida got to hold financial literacy campaigns within her community. She explained why people must open a bank account and why keeping savings in a bank is important, especially for women. She talked about how savings help build capital, which can later be used to buy income-generating assets. Some of her early customers started their ventures after they followed this strategy. They started rearing hens for eggs and earning around BDT 125 (USD 1.14) per week. The community felt Fahmida's words and she slowly started to gain customers. Women who used to save in clay pots started a Deposit Pension Scheme(DPS) account with her. Word spread and men joined as well.

“ Thanks to the Sathi network, I reached where I am. My goal is to help pave the way for more young women who wish to change their fortune with Sathi.

WAY FORWARD

Fahmida has a fond memory of her campaign with women from the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) program. Her campaign helped them understand the importance of savings, which led them to hold a long-standing DPS with her. As a result, the women could graduate from the VGD program and become financially resilient. Fahmida is optimistic about the future and hopes the Sathi network will become more robust with more women entrepreneurs like her. She believes vulnerable women in her community should have access to credit facilities. Suitable asset financing can help them become financially resilient. Fahmida seeks to expand her services to 5,000 customers from 2,000 and become sustainable within five years.

LEARNINGS

The story of Fahmida teaches us about hard work, determination and a sheer drive to bring positive change to the lives of underserved people, especially women. Her success resonates with her customers and beneficiaries as well due to her motivation for a positive impact.

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