

SATHI

(CASE STUDY 4)



FAHIMA MEHZABEEN: A SATHI MEMBER

an Inspiring Journey of Enterprise Spirit and Community Empowerment

BACKGROUND

Fahima Mehzabeen is a middle-aged woman who lives in Bhaluka pouroshobha, a small town in Mymensingh district under Dhaka division, Bangladesh. She has a master's degree and could easily get a job. Yet she started her own business in her community in spite of being well aware of the risk factors. She wanted independence and flexibility in her work, which a traditional job would not offer her. She also wanted to contribute to her community's development and welfare, especially for women.

She started her business in 2013 with the Pourashava Digital Centre (PDC). This government initiative provided various digital services to citizens, such as bill payment, passport fees, e-commerce services, and birth registration. She was among the first women to join the PDC network and faced many challenges and discrimination from her male counterparts and customers. She had to share a small room with another male businessman who used to take most payments and commissions even though she did most of the work. She also had to deal with harsh stereotypical comments, such as "women cannot and should not run these types of businesses."



Once, we completed a project worth BDT 50,000. But the bill was only prepared under my male business counterpart's name. I felt very frustrated. I did most of the work. But, he took all the money during the time of payment merely because he was a man.

However, she did not give up and worked hard to prove herself. She maintained good communication and relationships with government officials and local representatives, who recognized her integrity, honesty, quality of work, and popularity. She also built trust and loyalty with her customers, who appreciated her fast and reliable service. She gradually gained control and ownership of the PDC business, and the male counterpart left.

I have built an excellent relationship with the Pouroshobha Mayor sir, UNO (Upazilla Nirbahi Officer) sir, and other government officials. I built such good and prestigious relationships based on trust through honesty and integrity. My education also helped me gain these connections.

In 2018, she added another service to her portfolio: Agent banking allows customers to access financial services through authorized local agents instead of requiring them to travel to bank branches. These agents could be shops, post offices, or individuals. Agent banking is especially beneficial for rural and remote areas, where bank branches are scarce and inaccessible. Fahima partnered with Bank Asia, a leading bank in Bangladesh, to provide agent banking services. These include account opening, money transfer, loan application, savings, cash deposit, loan disbursement, and loan repayment, etc.

Fahima faced another challenge when she started her agent banking business—competition. Several bank branches were already present in her area, such as Sonali Bank, First Security Islami Bank, Islami Bank Bangladesh, and National Bank. People, including herself, doubted her ability to establish an agent banking business there. But she proved them wrong. She used her popularity, integrity, hard work, education and networking skills to attract and retain customers. She also got advice and support from the pourashobha's mayor, who helped her get a room near the PDC to run her agent banking business. This decision worked a game-changer for her, as she could now manage both businesses more efficiently and effectively.

Later, she joined the Sathi network, which seeks to promote women's financial inclusion and empowerment through digital platforms, such as mobile financial services and agent banking. The Sathi network provides training, mentoring and support to women entrepreneurs and agent bankers like Fahima to help them grow their businesses and reach out to more female customers. Fahima arranges community events, such as uthan boithok, where women can learn about the benefits and features of formal financial services through the Sathi network. These include savings, loans, insurance and social safety nets.



Poor women have a lot of misconceptions about banking services. Most did not know that bank accounts can be opened for free.

CASE IN POINT

Fahima Mehzabeen has achieved remarkable results and created impacts through her business and involvement in the Sathi network. Here are some main findings:

- She has a diversified and profitable business portfolio with multiple sources of income and services. She has a business with Bank Asia, bKash, Nagad, Upay and Rocket-leading MFS and agent banking providers in Bangladesh. She also provides other services through her PDC, such as bill payment, e-commerce, birth registration and training. She has recently applied for the registered training office (RTO) license, which will allow her to provide training and certification on basic computer skills to her customers and employees.
- She has a loyal and satisfied customer base who value her service quality and speed. Each day, she opens bank accounts for seven to eight women and conducts 40 MFS and 30 agent banking transactions, with an average of BDT 100,000 and BDT 250,000, respectively. She earns an average monthly income of BDT 150,000 from her PDC. Of this, BDT 7,000 comes from MFS commissions and BDT 15,000 from agent banking commissions. She contributes BDT 25,000 to her family expenses and saves BDT 20,000 monthly. She also pays BDT 4,500 for property or space rent and BDT 60,000 for employee salaries. She has four permanent employees; three in the PDC and one in the agent banking outlet. She also has some reserve staff who help her with campaigns or extra work.
- She has received recognition and appreciation from various stakeholders, such as government officials, local representatives, customers and peers. She has achieved several awards and honors for her work, such as two divisional-level awards, five district-level awards, two national-level awards, and one best entrepreneurial award. She is also a member of the local ladies' club, where only government officials can be members. She is a well-known and respected figure in her community now and a role model for other women who want to start or grow their businesses.
- Upon joining the Sathi network, Fahima Mehzabeen demonstrated commitment to elevate the project and ensure its campaigns' success. The uthan boithok initiative, spearheaded by Fahima, significantly contributed to the project's success. She has helped open more than 3,000 women's bank accounts in her agent banking outlet. Fahima's dedication extends beyond her local area; she has taken the uthan boithok concept to garment factories and dispelled misconceptions about formal financial services. Women have been educated about the accessibility of services through these initiatives, such as free bank account openings in Bank Asia and the myriad benefits offered through UDC (Union Digital Centre) or PDC (Pourashava Digital Centre).

Additionally, Fahima has played a crucial role in enlightening women about government facilities, such as SSN (Social Safety Net) services, which include allowances during maternity periods. Fahima has contributed significantly to the Sathi network's goals and objectives as she is an active and influential member. Her proactive involvement has resulted in the substantial opening of women's bank accounts and shown her leadership in the organization of impactful uthan boithok events. These events provide a platform to empower and educate women and make them aware of the numerous financial services available, especially tailored to meet the needs of the underserved. Fahima's success story within the Sathi network is attributed to her passion and the valuable support and guidance the network provided.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Fahima Mehzabeen has a vision and a plan to grow her business and provide more value-added services to her customers, such as training and certification. She wants to become a registered training officer where she can offer training and certification to her customers and employees on various topics, such as financial literacy, digital skills, entrepreneurship and leadership. She believes this will help her customers and employees improve their skills and knowledge to access more opportunities and benefits and eliminate misconceptions about financial services. She also wants to provide more services, such as e-commerce, insurance and social safety nets, which can help her customers improve their livelihoods and well-being.

Fahima requires more help and support from various sources to achieve her vision and plan. These include the Sathi network, the government, the banks, the MFS providers and the local community. She needs more training and mentorship on how to run a training and certification business, ways to design and deliver effective and relevant courses, and ways to market and promote her services. She also needs more resources and information on how to access and provide more services, such as e-commerce and insurance, and how to comply with the rules and regulations of these services.

Fahima should also invest to upgrade her infrastructure, such as space, improve her service quality and efficiency, and reduce the risks and costs of logistical problems. She should also be aware of the potential threats and challenges that she may face in the future, such as increased competition, fraud, safety and security issues, or policy changes, and prepare contingency plans and strategies to deal with them.

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