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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Community

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Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

Narrator: In Southwestern Bangladesh, thousands of men and women are living and working together in a way they never have before. In this community of the Shakhira District a profound change is taking place between wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, women and men.

Bahanur Begum and Habibur Rahman are involved in this change. Over the last ten years their marriage has undergone a dramatic transformation.

Bahanur Begum: I used to think that as a woman I had to stay inside the house and do whatever my husband said. Heaven lies at the feet of my husband - that's what I used to believe.

Habibur Rahman: I used to believe that the wife should be imprisoned indoors, listen to what we say, go where we take them, and wear whatever clothes we buy for them. They shouldn't spend anything independently. The man will eat first and the woman will eat whatever is leftover. That's what I thought.

Narrator: In Bangladesh, many men have traditionally regarded women as property. A woman is a father's daughter, a husband's wife, and a son's mother before she is allowed to be a person in her own right.

Mohammed Bishas lives in a neighboring village, uninvolved in the changes being experienced by people like Habibur and Bahanur.

Mohammed Bishas: Women can't do the work that men can do. How could it be possible for men and women to be equal? Men want their wives to stay at home and their bodies to be fully covered. This is what everyone wants. They want this because this is good. It is good for women to be fully covered. It said in the Hadit that it is better for women to not go out. That's why!

Narrator: Mohammed Bishas' strict interpretation of the Hadith, an Islamic scripture, maintains that it is better for society if the activities and responsibilities of men and women are kept separate. Mohammed Bishas' wife believes that it would be sinful to challenge her husband's authority.

Mohammed Bishas' wife: Without asking my husband I can't go out.

[Interviewer: What will happen?] He would be hurt and he might yell at me.

[Interviewer: What happens when your husband is hurt?] From the religious point of view, Allah would be angry. **[Interviewer: Your husband has gone out to wash. You're hungry. Will you eat before he returns?]** How can I eat before my husband does?

[Interviewer: What happens if you do eat before he does?] My husband will have a shorter life.

Narrator: Subordination of women is not unique to Bangladesh. Throughout the world, the majority of mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives face cradle to grave discrimination. According to the United Nations, women own less than 1% of the world's property, earn only 10% of the world's income, but do 2/3 of the world's work. Women grow more than half of the world's food and prepare almost all of it. They work an average of 14 hours a day. and often carry loads of water and wood that match their body weight. It does not matter if a woman is young, old, or sick, most poor women have never had a day of rest in their lives. Ten years ago it was no different for Bahanur.

Bahanur: The fact that I worked at home from sunrise to sunset looking after the children, cooking, and doing other domestic chores had no value. If my husband discovered that something was not done, he would hit me.

Habibur: When she disobeyed me, I beat her. And there were times when I didn't let her eat when she wanted to. My wish was that she act according to my will.

Narrator: Habibur and Bahanur's marriage started to change in 1985 when they became involved in the credit and training programs of a local, non-profit organization called Uttaran. "Uttaran" which means upliftment has for 20 years demonstrated that social and economic growth depends on the participation of all members of the community, especially women. Shaidul Islam is Uttaran's current director. Mr. Islam grew up in the Satkhira district, and with his sister and a number of other local residents founded Uttaran in 1976.

Shaidal Islam (Director of Uttaran): A community cannot develop if half its people are kept inside, imprisoned in the dark. So the first task is to help women gain equal freedom to go outside the house, freedom to go to the market, freedom to go to social and religious gatherings.

Narrator: Uttaran believes that equal rights for women is not only fair but economically smart. In its experience, when financial resources are invested in women the benefits to children, families, and the community are maximized.

Shaidal Islam (Director of Uttaran): When a woman gets money what does she do with it? First, she spends it on her child's education, on healthcare, on important household needs.

Narrator: At first, getting women involved in Uttaran's programs met with resistance from their husbands and fathers.

Unidentified woman: When we first started a women's group, men threatened us. They said bad things about us - that we would fall from God's graces and go to hell.

Bahanur: The village leaders told our husbands that your wives are going to Uttaran to sing and dance, and that we would end up in hell. We explained to them that the group is helping us improve our lives.

Narrator: When Bahanur told her husband she wanted to join Uttaran, Habibur thought his authority was being challenged.

Habibur: [Interviewer: Initially when your wife went out of the house and joined the Uttaran group, how did you feel?] I was angry. [Interviewer: Did you put up resistance?] Yes. [Interviewer: What kind of resistance?] I said that you can't do that. If you do that, it will go against our religion. [Interviewer: Then what did you do?] Let's forget about it.

Bahanur: We told our husbands, Look, if we're going to end up in hell, what about the daughters of rich families who go to colleges and have jobs in offices? If they don't end up in hell, how come we're going to end up there? We go outside of our homes to work because we have hunger pains in our stomachs. After many arguments and fights, they eventually stopped objecting.

Narrator: Resistance to Uttaran led staff to come up with a breakthrough concept in women's development: get men involved, break down their resistance by including them in the programs. This unique approach has been a key to Uttaran's success.

Habibur: We joined Uttaran, and they gave us training. We learned many things, including that we didn't have to give up our religion.

Narrator: Uttaran encourages men and women to form small groups through which they have access to an integrated program of loans and training. The loans help people improve their standard of living and serve as an important incentive for participation, especially for men.

Habibur: A staff was sent from Uttaran and came to me and suggested that I join a group. He said that if you join a group, you won't have to go to the bank to take out a loan. If you take a loan from Uttaran, you won't have to pay bribes or high interest. With that loan, you can start your own business and run your own household.

With the loan from Uttaran, my group started a fish farm. We dug the pond, and Uttaran trained us to fish farm. Now we can each catch two kilos of fish from our own pond. We can share them among ourselves to eat or sell them. It's a different situation now. The amount of work has increased a lot compared to the past. I'm in business for myself and have some new land. I have mortgages. The workload has increased four times, but the suffering [from poverty] has decreased. The main thing is food. Without food, one cannot work hard.

Narrator: Uttaran functions like a bank, offering small loans averaging \$50US per person for group projects or individual needs. Both group and individual loans must be approved and guaranteed by all group members. If a person falls behind in their debt repayment, the other members are held responsible. Uttaran has received 93% repayment on its loans. For women, the loans provide a rare opportunity in Bangladesh for ownership. Ownership allows them independence and increases their decision-making role within the family and community.

Bahanur: Normally, men are the owners but now, we [women] own a rice mill. We are in charge of the whole process of buying, boiling, drying, husking, and selling the rice. Rich women come to us from the village and say, "You've done good work. We may be wealthy, but we don't have any rights. We're not allowed to leave our homes." We tell them, "Look, you may have several dresses to wear and we may have only one, but we're at peace. We leave our homes. We can go to town. You can't do that. We're learning a lot of things."

They feel very sad. If women like us come to us we say, "Look, we're saving money on a weekly basis. You don't even have one cent. Be like us, get a group together, share your problems, start your own savings accounts." The fact that women own a rice mill has changed the community. It has brought glory for women. Throughout the region, it is known and talked about that in a certain place there is a mill, a women's mill.

Shaidal Islam (Director of Uttaran): In a country like ours, for a woman to come outside the house to work is a revolutionary change. It's not that they never come out, but when they do they come holding the hand of a man or they take a small boy along. From this point of view, for women to come out to work independently is a huge change.

Narrator: To help group members cope with the fears and conflicts associated with these changes, Uttaran provides training programs. They cover basic needs such as literacy and health care, and also discuss the benefits of equality.

Uttaran teacher: Sir, can you summarize what we have just discussed?

Unidentified man: We have learned that men and women should take equal responsibility for raising the children.

Narrator: In Bangladesh, for men and women to sit side by side and discuss their views is an accomplishment in and of itself. But Uttaran's work to improve the status of women is condemned by those who believe that it violates cultural and religious traditions. The controversy has led to social tension and sometimes to violence.

Shadona, an Uttaran staff member was publicly stripped and beaten in an attempt to drive her out of the community. Opponents spread rumors, including the false claim that Uttaran requires a person to reject their religious beliefs. Uttaran encourages people to participate in open debates.

Unidentified man: Women should not be allowed to go out alone in public.

Unidentified woman: How will I survive? My husband has complete control over the money and does whatever he wants with it.

Unidentified man: If we want to change the society and educate ourselves, then we can move on. What can be wrong with my wife going outside the house to help support the family?

Narrator: Discussions like these and experiences like those of Habibur and Bahanur reverberate throughout many areas of the Satkhira district. More than 11,000 men and women have formed 440 groups. In the nearby village of Pankuri, a women's group received a loan from Uttaran to start a roof tile factory. Shukjan, the group leader is a widow. In Bangladesh as in many societies around the world, widows are virtual non-entities. Widowhood carries a strong stigma and remarriage is rare. Widows are often sexually abused.

Shukjan: If you are a widow, men take advantage of you. They tell you to come and stay with them, to have affairs with them. And they offer money and food in return.

Shaidal Islam (Director of Uttaran): After her husband died, wealthy men often harrassed her with their propositions. One of them raped her and she was afraid to report it. After joining a women's group, she was given training and we tried to make her aware of her rights. It was then that she denounced her rapist.

Narrator: Shukjan pressed charges against her assailant who was convicted and sent to prison.

Shaidal Islam (Director of Uttaran): Because of Shukjan's actions, there was a movement throughout our area. There was a revolutionary change. Many poor people stood up and fought for their rights.

Shukjan: I will not remain silent anymore. Whatever happens, I will bring it out into the open. Once I was left for dead. If I had died, you wouldn't have known any of this. By speaking up, I have benefitted a lot. I will continue to speak out. If others are mistreated and they're afraid to speak up, I shall work with them. If I can, I will speak for them. The days of being silent are over.

Shaidal Islam (Director of Uttaran): Shukjan is an example of how the awareness training has changed her life. Now she can send her child to school. She earns her own living. She's no longer a begger. Nor is she dependent on anyone's kindness. She's self-reliant and no one dares to proposition her.

Narrator: Shukjan and her group of women own and run the roof tile factory. The roof tiles on Habibur and Bahanur's house were made by this factory.

Habibur: In the past, we had a thatched hut. Now, we have a tiled roof. Next, God willing, we might be able to buy bricks and build a brick house. In the past, I wore a torn shirt. Now, I have a dirty shirt [without tears]. Next time, you might see me with a clean shirt.

Narrator: It took Habibur seven years of arguing, listening, and courage to change his behavior.

Habibur: Before, I didn't wash the dishes. My pride wouldn't let me. Doing women's work is embarrassing at first. A lot of men give me a hard time. They say, "Habibur is washing the dishes. Habibur is cleaning the courtyard or cooking." But what I've learned is that in the end, whatever those men say, they aren't going to feed my family. I have to earn my own money and provide for my family myself.

The progress my wife and I were making by working together kept me from giving up. I saw that an hour's work was getting done in a half an hour. If I helped her with her work, she could help me with mine. We'd be done with our household chores faster and get back to our other work.

Bahanur: I took a loan from Uttaran and bought a cow. Now my children can drink milk. That'll make them healthy.

Shaidal Islam (Director of Uttaran): To own a cow in our agriculturally-based society is very significant, particularly for a woman. So for Bahanur to own a cow is indicative of her independence and equality. Besides, it's a major asset. Bahanur can sell the cow or its milk whenever she pleases. It's like money in the bank.

Bahanur: Now we have a cow, we have a rice mill, and we have money. Before, we had nothing. Before, we ate at most once a day. Our clothes were torn. Our children couldn't go to school because they didn't have proper clothes or food or books. We couldn't leave our homes or participate in the village government.

My husband never bothered to discuss anything with me. Today, if we buy a piece of machinery or a piece of land, we, husband and wife, buy it together and keep it together. Now, our husbands help us with our work and we help them with theirs. And they help us in raising our children.

Habibur: Our eyes have opened. Now we live by our own wisdom. The way I used to mistreat their mother, that's not the case anymore and the children can see that. I hope that kind of beating will never take place again. It was bad education for the children. Now, the children are getting educated. Education is everything.

Bahanur: When I was a child, my mother used to wake me up and say, "Hurry up and wash the dishes. And boil an egg for your brother so he can go to school. But girls should also go to school? She didn't care about that. We know now that just as boys go to school, girls should also go to school. I want them to get high school and college degrees and to get jobs.

Habibur: My father and uncles made a small attempt to educate the boys, but no attempt to educate the girls. I'm going to educate my daughter the same way as I educate my son. I know now that a woman's life is like my life. They want to be independent in the same way that men want to be independent. They hurt and bleed the same way we do. We are creations of the same god.