

Union Facilitators Leave a Legacy of Better Nutrition Practices in Bangladesh

By SPRING/Bangladesh



Photo credit: SPRING/Bangladesh

Union Facilitator Oloka Biswas speaks to a farmer nutrition school graduate and her family members

"I have learned everything about health and hygiene from SPRING. We know how to grow papayas, yardlong beans, and spinach. We all have wonderful vegetable gardens and have learned about rearing chickens and fish. We also have tippy taps!"

--Tahomina Begum, an FNS graduate

Nutrition Brothers and Sisters

Not many people can say they have a "Nutrition Sister" and a "Nutrition Brother." In Bangladesh, participants in the farmer nutrition schools (FNS) implemented by the Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) project, came to look forward to visits by SPRING's union facilitators who help reinforce the nutrition and hygiene practices learned through FNS. These visits earned the facilitators the nicknames *Pushti Apa* (Nutrition Sister) and *Pushti Bhai* (Nutrition Brother).

Not Just an Ordinary School

The USAID-funded SPRING project launched FNS in Bangladesh in 2012. Farmer nutrition schools are an innovative, group-based learning approach targeting resource-poor households with pregnant and lactating women and women who have children under the age of two. The goal of the schools is to promote good nutrition and hygiene practices in the community and enhance access to diverse nutrient-rich vegetables, poultry, and fish. SPRING hired union facilitators from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to visit communities after completion of FNS training to promote healthy household food consumption, equitable intra-household food distribution, and appropriate dietary diversity, particularly for women and children.

For Mr. Ripon Kumar Saha, a *Pushti Bhai*, being a union facilitator was more than just a job. "Working for SPRING has been a life-changing experience for me. The knowledge that I have acquired on health and nutrition here has been highly beneficial in my personal life."

Ms. Oloka Biswas, a *Pushti Apa*, says "It was a great job! [...] This workplace has a strong belief in gender equality. Everyone on our team was like a brother or a sister. We had very strong co-operation and helped each other out."

SPRING worked closely with the union facilitators and their respective organizations to ensure that the skills and knowledge they gained will enable their organizations to provide effective community-based nutrition activities after SPRING's work has finished.

Seeing the Fruits of Their Labor

In the SPRING project working area, which includes 40 *upazilas* (sub-districts) in Khulna and Barisal Divisions, more than 80 percent of households are now equipped with tippy taps for handwashing and every household now has its own source of food from poultry, horticulture, and/or fish. These changes reflect social and behavioral shifts that are improving hygiene and nutrition. In these *upazilas*, it is almost impossible to find a household unaware of the essential diet for pregnant and lactating women and for children under two years of age.

Without a doubt, *Pushti Apas* and *Pushti Bhais* were essential in bringing nutrition messages to such a large audience. As a SPRING staff member pointed out, "Without the union facilitators' large-scale reach, project implementation at this scale would not have been possible. They have made the FNS sessions a success, which allowed us to focus on enhancing capacity building within the government." He further adds, "They visited each and every one of these households and formed one-on-one relationships with FNS members who promoted social and behavioral change in essential

This story is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of the Cooperative Agreement AID-OAA-A-11-00031. The SPRING project is managed by the JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), with partners Helen Keller International, the Manoff Group, Save the Children, and the International Food Policy Research Institute. The contents are the responsibility of JSI, and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

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Union Facilitator Ripon Kumar Saha provides administrative support at a nutrition event organized by SPRING.

nutrition and hygiene practices. Because of their devotion, SPRING's messages have made a place in the hearts of the local people."

With the approaching completion of the SPRING project in Bangladesh, all union facilitators concluded their duties in late June 2016. Nonetheless, their presence is felt through the bountiful vegetable gardens, thriving ponds, productive hatching pots, and healthier families they left behind.

More than 126,000 women have benefited from 6,421 SPRING-implemented farmer nutrition schools across 40 *upazilas* in Barisal and Khulna since May 2012. SPRING/Bangladesh facilitates social and behavior change to prevent stunting in young children by focusing on nutrition during the critical "1,000 days" from pregnancy through the first two years of life.