

Women in the driver's seat...CARE Bangladesh shows the way

During my recent visit to CARE Bangladesh, I was particularly moved by my meeting with its female drivers – not the well-heeled ones driving their own cars but those who do it for a living, often called chauffeurs when they drive privileged people around. Why was I moved? What was so special? Reflecting on these questions, I realized there are many reasons for this -- personal, professional and societal. The experiences and the stories the women drivers shared demonstrated that with a lot of courage and conviction and a bit of support, women can break free from the rigid traditional norms that restrict them, and move into new roles that help them realize their full potential. What CARE Bangladesh has achieved is not just a successful initiative but a movement that demonstrates the world of possibilities. What was thought to be impossible just 10 years ago is now a well accepted reality.

My excitement about meeting the women drivers started the minute I received a message from CARE Bangladesh about the arrangements for my airport pick-up. It said, 'You will be picked up a CARE driver. **She** will be holding a placard with your name on it.' I re-read the message once again and only then did its significance hit me. Yes, I am going to be picked for the first time in my many travels with CARE, by a female driver. And, I really started looking forward to the experience.

The Ultimate Symbol of Women's Liberation and Freedom

I travel with confidence around the world but when it comes to driving, I am still not comfortable driving long distances or in the busy, unruly roads in Delhi. I am afraid that if I get into an accident, the row will not just be about me or my driving skills. Instead there will be a general statement blaming all women and why women should not be driving. May be because of this personal perspective, I have a special respect for women who drive, especially those that drive big cars or trucks on highways in cultures where many still believe that women's place is in their homes. I find women driving without any fear to be the ultimate symbol of women's liberation and freedom!

At Dhaka airport I was met by Rekha Akter, dressed in a traditional Bangladeshi outfit, nothing really differentiating her as a professional driver from the many other women in the airport. Normally, I wouldn't think too much before handing over my suitcase to the male driver for loading it into the vehicle, but this time, I felt like loading it myself.

Gendered Conditioning

I smiled to myself as I realized how gendered my conditioning was. Of course, it is okay for men to take charge of your heavy suitcases, but how could I let another woman to do the same?

As our car started moving through the slow traffic, I noticed that every time the vehicles stopped, the drivers in the vehicles around us would start looking casually around and would simply stop in amazement when they found a lady sitting in the driver's seat. And, most of them would not take their gaze off until the vehicles from behind started honking. I hardly saw any other car being driven by ladies in Dhaka streets (in Delhi, there are hordes of women on the road driving their own vehicles though there aren't any professional women employed as drivers) and so I was not surprised at this reaction. However, what really amazed me was Rekha's cool and dignified demeanor. She seemed oblivious to all the attention that she was drawing and drove on with a professional look.

In response to my request, a meeting had been arranged for me to talk to the women drivers. Unfortunately, I could not meet with all the women drivers (as they were on duty) but just one meeting with a handful - Rekha, Wamra, Ruksana, Firdausi, Lyzoo, and Rabia - gave me a taste of their struggles and triumphs. The following quotes illustrate that.

"I was scared initially but since I do not have a good education, I thought joining this profession can change my life. I will be able to see different places and earn good money."

"I was first working as a security guard then when I saw the women drivers, I also wanted to be one. My family did not support the idea at first. My husband said no as it was not a safe profession for women."

"I used to work for the HIV program as an outreach worker; my economic situation was not good. I saw CARE female drivers and heard that CARE provides training without any money. It was difficult at first to get information on how to enroll for the training but one of the CARE drivers helped."

"My uncle is a driver and one day when I touched his car, he shouted at me and said, 'Don't touch that.' That made me motivated and I resolved to drive a car one day!"



Women Drivers of CARE Bangladesh pose with me

"I did not know that women could drive; I used to be a member of an adolescent group in another NGO." On seeing some women drivers and learning that drivers make good money, I expressed my interest. Then the NGO staff approached CARE's Transport Service Department to get me enrolled. Initially my family objected then they were slowly convinced."

"I came from Chittagong, where I worked in a beauty parlor run by a retired Colonel. I expressed my interest to learn driving but was not allowed. Then I joined a security company in Chittagong. I saw CARE drivers and communicated with the transport department. Then, from being a security guard in a CARE project office, I became a driver."



Happy to be in the driver's seat!

"My dream has been fulfilled. I have seen the whole country – visited 45 districts now. I am also a trainer. I earn good money, am ensuring that my children get good education. My dream is to open a training center for women....The best part is that I have even taught driving to my husband."

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What attracted these young women coming from poor families to driving vehicles was the freedom of movement and the possibility of seeing many different places and earning a decent income. Of course, this journey is not without its share of challenges. Night driving, especially in remote areas, is a real challenge. What if the vehicle breaks down or the weather turns bad? And, of course, societal and family pressures keep surfacing.

As one of the women driver's said, "It needs constant effort to keep my job. I am lucky to have a cooperative husband but after a couple of years, my husband asked me to leave the job. He said, 'Now that you have tried it, stay at home. There is no need for you to work. I am capable of taking care of you and our children.' However, I feel good about working and feel if both of us earn we can give a better education and life to our children. I will continue in my efforts to convince him and hope that I can continue to work as long as I want."

Despite all the positive experiences, I heard that some managers don't want women to be assigned as their drivers. Despite motivational efforts, women drivers have apparently not yet been appointed for private home use because of social stigmas associated with the matter.

In addition to the women themselves who took the initiative to be where they are, we also have to recognize and appreciate the pivotal role played by the CARE leadership, the Gender and Diversity Team and the cooperation of the Transport Service Department and male drivers in CARE Bangladesh. The male drivers are by and large cooperative. In the words of the women drivers, "They taught us how to fill forms

required by the transport department and they sometimes step in to do late night duties in our place if required.”

Women drivers of CARE drive sedans, three-ton vehicles, pick-ups and minibuses. They work for offices both in the city and a number of districts. They are considered to be more law-abiding and honest compared to their male counterparts. CARE Bangladesh has trained nearly 50 women so far and currently employs around 22 female drivers. The women trained by CARE are now increasingly being hired by other UN organizations and NGOs, thus creating a movement of sorts. An innovative idea piloted by CARE Bangladesh as part of their efforts to promote gender equity which was confronted by opposition has now become something that every one is proud to be part of. It has been successful in supporting women’s entry into a traditionally male-dominated profession.

It was a real privilege to meet these role models and to feel that women are finally in the driver’s seat in Bangladesh. I hope this will serve as an inspiration to thousands of women and other CARE country offices. I wish to end this note by an interesting anecdote that one of the women drivers shared.

“Once, after dropping off some CARE staff for a meeting, I was waiting next to the car. A middle-aged man saw me and asked with a lot of doubt in his voice, ‘do you drive this car?’ To this, I replied, “No, I just sit in it.”

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