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# Katalyst blog series: Working on women-led distribution networks - Katalyst's experience



Faiza Alam

All blogs

**Read how Katalyst partnered with a firm to design an intervention targeting women homestead farmers.**

According to the FAO, women comprise around half of the agricultural work force in Bangladesh. However, social barriers often restrict their interactions with mainstream market players (mostly dominated by men), thus limiting their access to information on cultivation techniques, market pricing mechanisms, market information, access to financial services, and access to quality agro-inputs. Usually, private sector companies dealing in agriculture do not consider women as a potential customer base due to the lack of visibility of women in market places. They therefore fail to design products and services for the end users of homestead input - women.

Under such conditions, women-led distribution networks initiated by the private sector and development programmes have developed a solution to reach homestead women farmers. Rural families are comfortable with allowing women to access information and services with other women in the neighborhood. The private sector, simultaneously, has a channel to promote products and services directly through such network bases.

## Katalyst's experience in women-led distribution networks

Katalyst's vegetable sector has been working to create better links between poor vegetable farmers and private input companies for over 10 years. It has worked

towards creating distribution networks to promote access to agro-information and input supply in many of its interventions. One key achievement was that 45% of the sector's beneficiary groups were homestead women farmers buying seeds or other inputs. With this in mind, Katalyst partnered with Syngenta Bangladesh, a leading private input company, to design an intervention targeting women homestead farmers to establish women-led distribution networks to promote quality inputs.

As an intervention focal, it was not easy trying to get the private sector onboard with such an idea. Initially when we approached private companies, they were not ready to invest in a new market segment working with women as they were not sure whether these models would work. In 2014, we planned to approach companies with whom we had previous working experience so that it was easier to explain the concept. The companies approached were large companies with established distribution networks and thus naturally more capacity to try such models. Private companies also often look for evidence or some data reference when new models are being pitched. In this case, the past experience and the achievement of the vegetable sector of Katalyst helped to provide the reference point to prove that women can become an important customer base for these input companies.

### How did the model work?

Syngenta had relevant past experience and the resources to establish distribution networks, so they trained women distributors to create networks (each network had 30 homestead females in average) in various parts of the country. These women distributors were responsible for promoting Syngenta's seasonal products (agro-seeds and pesticides) by meeting their farmer groups once a week. The homestead farmers were also able to call the women distributors directly to discuss crop related issues. For ease of identification, the women distributors either wore bags or caps with the company's logo. In these courtyard meetings, women farmer groups were trained on seasonal crop varieties, correct procedures of planting seeds, intensity of water, sunlight, shade and nutrients needed for optimum growth, methods of safe and judicious use of pesticides, pest and disease identification of their crops amongst other information. The women farmers could then purchase the company's products directly from the women distributors, or send their male counterparts to purchase it from the local market.

Since information and product was promoted through regular courtyard meetings, the women farmers, gained trust. Women farmers understood the importance of the knowledge disseminated through these distributors. The model was also well recognised by the company where, when the project phased out, the company continued to grow the distribution network amongst homestead women farmers. A total of 22,140 farmers were accessed through the intervention. On average, a farmer made an additional profit of BDT 6,000 per season.

## Challenges faced and lessons learnt during implementation

Private companies involved in agriculture which realise the impact of demonstration, understood the importance of targeting women of the household directly through regular courtyard meetings to gain momentum in their sales. However, at a field level, recruitment and retention of women staff remained a challenge. Most female distributors were in their 20s. Many personal issues such as getting married or finding better job opportunities led them to change jobs. So recruitment and training had to be pursued regularly by the company. However, women farmer groups were well receptive to such changes and accepted the new distributors positively.

Since courtyard meetings held in the neighborhoods were for women only, the women distributors did not find it difficult to gather farmers to form groups. Overtime, rural communities realised the value of such services directly at their doorstep which led to higher retention rates and continued participation.

## The way forward

Intervention models related to women led distribution networks in rural communities require heavy investments and strong rural resource set-ups. It is simpler to implement when working with established agro-input companies to expand in to new markets. Should a project/ programme be interested to work with new establishments, experience suggests that tapping in to existing networks such as that of associations or rural micro-finance institutes/ NGOs works well as they have the capacity to conduct such courtyard meetings. Development partners have to work closely with these organisations to ensure quality of knowledge/ product dissemination and successful continuation of such intervention models.

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