

## Effective Foreign Aid at Work:

# Majeda Begum Shiru

A local leader is leveraging a tiny investment of US foreign aid to enable women to speak up to improve health and education services in Bangladesh.

US foreign aid works best as a tool in the hands of the right local leaders—those trying to solve their own problems in their own nations and neighborhoods.

Majeda Begum Shiru has become one of the locally-elected officials who she previously thought she had no power to influence. Shiru is a member of the District Public Policy Forum (DPPF) in her community of Patiya in the southeastern Chittagong district of Bangladesh. USAID supported the creation of these forums in Bangladesh where citizens and civil society groups engage with local members of Parliament, departments of education and health, and local government officials to discuss issues of importance to the community.

The process of having regular forums such as these raises awareness of government's responsibilities among citizens, and can lead to reduced corruption or abuse of funds when Parliamentarians are more connected to the issues the community faces on a day-to-day basis.



**POVERTY-FIGHTING FOREIGN AID IS  
<1% OF THE US FEDERAL BUDGET.**

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Americans spend as much on maintaining their lawns—\$30 billion annually—as the US government spends on foreign aid.



Americans spend more on caring for pets—\$45 billion annually—than the US government spends on foreign aid.

*From Oxfam publication, "Foreign Aid 101."*

Perhaps more importantly, the DPPFs provide a new opportunity for citizens — especially women — to communicate with their government. In the past, Shiru herself rarely even used to go into government offices.

"Even if I did, I felt uncomfortable," she explains. "But [today] women can now speak out and voice out their problems directly. The MP [promises] his community that their concerns will be discussed in Parliament."

Women like Majeda Begum Shiru are using the forums to address the high rates of maternal mortality and primary school drop-outs. Last year a group Shiru leads successfully advocated for adding an additional doctor to the gynecology ward and improvements to the ambulance at their local hospital. And in response to calls from Shiru and the community to improve the education system, the local school will soon be providing meals for the students on a trial basis, in an effort to encourage better attendance.



Majeda Begum Shiru (center) and her fellow District Public Policy Forum members in south eastern Bangladesh.

**“Whenever there is a school gathering, or any sort of general gathering in the area, there are a large number of women present. We speak out to make these pressing issues known,”** says Shiru. “It is only after I joined the DPPF that I found out new ways to empower women. I saw that to acquire [government] funds, we had to exert a lot of pressure to get it.”

USAID, in partnership with The Asia Foundation, is investing in long-term skills development in women in the “Promoting Democratic Institutions and Practices” Project to ensure they can share their concerns and opinions regarding health and education needs for themselves and their families in public meetings well into the future. A local NGO, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), provides public speaking and leadership training to Shiru and many other women, strengthening their confidence and ability to engage in public.

“The women say, ‘I am unable to send my child to school. How do you plan to solve that problem?’ Because of these kinds of questions being asked, [the officials] must answer to the public directly,” Shiru says.

At the Patiya District Public Policy Forum in July 2012, the convener Pankaj Chakroborti said, “Citizens, they are aware of their rights and thus can demand for better treatment, so the scenario is slowly changing. **The authorities at all levels, in all sectors, are becoming more proactive.**”

Shiru believes this will continue. “BNPS has opened our eyes about our rights and place in the community. We have learned how to speak up for ourselves,” she says. “We will continue to do so long after this project has expired.”

In recent years, the US government launched policy reforms that make US foreign aid more accountable to you, US taxpayers, and local leaders like Majeda Begum Shiru.

Aid works best when it supports local actors to take action and change the circumstances which place or keep them or their fellow citizens in poverty. Supporting effective aid reduces the need for more aid later.

That’s why Oxfam America is working to deepen the US government’s commitment to making aid more effective. **Tell Congress: Don’t cut aid. Keep investing directly in heroes like Majeda Begum Shiru.**

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