

Village women are also getting international treatment of breast cancer



▼ Screening at the Amader Gram *Breast Cancer Screening Centre* in Bagerhat



Amader Gram
ICT4D Project

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ICT awareness for women in rural villages

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The smiling face of Ramisa Begum beams out (not her real name). The Medical Assistant's words have made her happy. What she suspected is not true. She breathes a sigh of relief. On the other hand, another 25-year-old woman has lost her smile. Her husband is also disheartened. What they suspected about her mother-in-law turned out to be true.

At the beginning of the feature, there was a hint of the topic being covered. In real life too, we like to play hide-and-seek with this. The topic is breast cancer.

Bengali women always feel hesitant and uncomfortable regarding this issue. Lack of knowledge and awareness are significant in this, but the main problem is social. A woman cannot even talk openly with her own husband about her suspicions of breast cancer, for fear that her husband will not consult the doctor. Since women are dependant on their husbands, they do not get primary treatment if they get breast cancer. When they do go to the doctor, it is usually at the last minute, then in most of the cases there is little the doctor can do.

Women of any age can get breast cancer. Awareness is the first essential. In the context of Bangladesh, many city-based women feel hesitant to consult a doctor, let alone those at the grassroots, where the situation is very wretched. Uneducated or little-educated women cannot even identify and explain the symptoms. Every year breast cancer progresses in almost 420,000 Bangladeshi women because of lack of awareness.

This picture has changed in Bagerhat. Women of this southern district can go to the doctors without any hesitancy. Through diagnosis, they get confirmation whether they are victims of breast cancer or not. Amader Gram's development project, *Information technology for development (ICT4D)*, is achieving all this.

A breast cancer diagnosis centre has been established at the SP bungalow area of Dashani. In fact it was the setting of the two incidents shown at the beginning of the feature. Information and technology is being applied here. Patients can get the opinions of doctors of Bagerhat, Khulna and Dhaka. Not only this, within just 8 to 12 hours they can get the expert opinions of the doctors of the International Breast Cancer Research Foundation of Ohio State University, USA.

Detailed patient information is stored on the centre's database. The center is not limited

to screening and can offer the necessary treatment for different degrees of breast cancer if needed. As all offers are free, women of all social levels can come here. Rural women are also getting this service from Amader Gram.

The diagnosis centre opened in September 2006. Since that time, about 200 women have received screening here. Among these, 13 women have been identified as victims of breast cancer.

Why this project?

When asked why Amader Gram is working on the treatment and awareness of breast cancer, the project director Reza Salim stated in Prothom Alo:

'In 1996 we made a grass root level survey here. We wanted to know the real condition and problems of the inhabitants and to develop their standard of living by using information technology. Then we found that the health problems of city people and rural people are different. Lots of work has been done on procreation and women-children health. However, not that much awareness has been generated on breast cancer. This is such a disease that women cannot disclose it to anyone. Taboos and orthodoxy are there regarding breast cancer. Therefore, we decided to work on this. And we are doing this with the help of communication and medical technology.'

Heather Roberto, an American researcher has had a leading role in the development of this endeavor. In her recent visit to Dhaka, Roberto described how, in 1999–2000 she worked with Amader Gram in Bagerhat and made detailed observations of the women of remote areas. Later, she became a researcher at the International Breast Cancer Research Foundation (IBCRF) in Ohio and she then invited Amader Gram to work on breast cancer.

The IBCRF is researching into cancer conditions and working to cure cancer in nine countries, including Bangladesh, Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia.

Observation, diagnosis and treatment – using ICT

Prescreening is completed first of all, at the Amader Gram *Breast Cancer Screening Centre* in Bagerhat. At this stage, the patient's name, age, address, position of problems and other details are recorded. This information is entered into the database immediately. Dr Moslema Parvin Akhi, a Medical Officer of Khulna Medical College Hospital, then comes to scrutinize the results. If anything suspicious is found in this non-clinical screening then the patient is sent to Khulna for clinical screening.

Clinical screening and observation is completed under the supervision of Dr Prof

Syed Mozammel Hoque of Khulna Medical College Hospital. Breast tissue samples are taken and arrayed on slides. The slides are then sent to Dhaka and examined by Dr Golam Mostafa of the National Cancer Institute. Prof Syed Mahbubul Alam of Dhaka Medical College also provides his opinion.

All the information gathered and generated in this process is sent immediately to the USA. Every step of the way, Dr Richard Love and his assistants at the International Breast Cancer Foundation of Ohio are able to send their comments relating to each patient.

Along with the prescreening information, all necessary information regarding the **treatment** of breast cancer is stored in the computer database. A team under Md Abdullah Al Mamun of Amader Gram designed the software that collects this information. Once the information has been sent to Ohio over the internet, it is accessed using the same Amader Gram software. In this way, the American experts can view the information in Ohio, just as it was at the point of origin, within 12 hours.

Ultimately, the information stored in the database is divided into three sections: Primary screening, diagnosis report and detailed report.

What the patients say

In the screening centre, we talked with some patients. We have not disclosed their names here for obvious reasons.

A 42-year-old widow said, *‘There has been pain in my breast for the last three years. I went to a Hujur. He gave oil balm, but it did not work. Then we consulted a homeopathic doctor too. They also failed, so now I am here.’* Her breast cancer is still at an early stage, so the doctors advised medication, which is working effectively.

Another 40-year-old woman said, *‘a gynaecologist told me to go to Dhaka. But it was not possible.’* Fluid from the lump in her breast was analyzed in the screening centre in Bagerhat. There was no sign of breast cancer.

Continuing to increase awareness

Screening and treatment facilities will not work on their own if women do not make use of them. Amader Gram is promoting the service in various villages of different upazilas of Bagerhat, as well as Rampal upazila. This promotion is through media such leaflets and miking. Kakoli Rani Halder, a worker of Amader Gram in Sreefoltola, Rampal said that, *‘village women do not want to say anything because of shyness. They need to be motivated in different ways. Many of them do not want*

to follow courses of treatment because of superstition.’

Pictorial books are distributed, so that women can do breast self-screening standing in front of mirror. These initiatives are working. Shahina Sultana, a female officer of Bagerhat district commented,

‘One of our colleagues, an Assistant upazila officer was very anxious. I send her to the screening centre. As a woman I can say, at least we can go there for any kind of problem, which is the key thing. Women cannot arrange money. Therefore this centre is very useful for them.’ She informed us that this has created a positive impression in the district town. Many have been cured, and many have been put at their ease, she added.

Shaplaful, a local organization of Bagerhat has been helping from the beginning to spread awareness.

Work is now spreading

Dr Rozina Afroze Rana, the coordinator of Amader Gram’s breast cancer activities said, *‘we have started our work in Khulna and Mymensingh along with Bagerhat. It has only recently begun, but we are getting a wide response. If it were possible to establish many screening centres in Dhaka, then it would be even more effective.’*

The initiators of this project have plans to work on the treatment and awareness of different difficult diseases of women like uterus cancer. They think that the percentage of breast cancer will be reduced if awareness is raised.

Other Amader Gram initiatives

A knowledge fair was arranged at Sreefoltola high school field on 15 December 2004. This fair included information with the ingredients of a rural fair. The use of information technology was therefore projected alongside local heritage. This fair was again held in January 2006. The third fair has not been arranged yet, because of the political situation.

Amader Gram has also formed teams of boys and girls of the different villages of Rampal. These teams are drafting maps after collecting information in the villages. The drafts are finalized on a computer using drafting software.

Amader Gram is continuously working to activate inactive computers in schools, to give students the chance to study computers, and to increase the chance of the teachers getting higher training.





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