



Women ICT Freelancer and Entrepreneur Development Program: *integrating into the supply chain*

Bangladesh is a densely populated country and half of her total population is women. Development in all spheres of this vast population is highly needed to ensure the long term economic stability and prosperity as a priority. Women empowerment is therefore a development challenge for ours as most of the women are not involved in economic activities. Under the Government **Digital Bangladesh** policy and the thrust sector initiative an atmosphere exists for accelerated growth and meaningful engagement through active interaction and transforming country into medium income economy and achieve **Vision 2021** by ensuring the full participation of women in economic activities.

This is a great opportunity for the women because this political assurance has created internet connectivity almost all over the country and related infrastructures are also developing. Women can take this opportunity but they need to be trained properly.

‘Small and Medium Enterprise Foundation (SMEF)’, widely known as SME Foundation, is an apex organization in Bangladesh for promoting micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs). SME Foundation has been facilitating SME development all over the country through providing entrepreneurship and skill development trainings, technological supports, collateral free credit facilities with single digit interest rate, ICT supports, business advisory services, research and policy advocacy services, supports to government for SME related policy implementation, etc. The Foundation is providing a special emphasis on the women empowerment issues to ensure the full participation of women entrepreneurs in the economic development process of Bangladesh.

‘Access to Information (a2i) Programme’ of Prime Minister’s office whose overall objective is to provide support in building a digital nation through delivering services at the citizen’s doorsteps. The program aims to improve quality, widen access and decentralized delivery of public services to ensure responsiveness and transparency. The ‘a2i Programme’ has established 4,547 UNION DIGITAL CENTERS, one-stop service outlets operating Union Parishads (UP, lowest tier of local government) of the country.

‘Bangladesh Women in Technology (BWIT)’ is a forum for Bangladesh’s ICT sector of women entrepreneurs, professionals and corporate forerunners, who are currently leaders of the ICT sector in the country.

SMEF in collaboration with a2i and BWIT has taken an initiative to create and develop **women** ICT entrepreneurs/freelancers/manpower all over Bangladesh. In this perspective, a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed among SMEF, a2i and BWIT

to launch “Women ICT Freelancer and Entrepreneur Development Program’ among the grass roots.



MoU Signing Ceremony among SMEF, a2i and BWIT



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Under this MoU, in the primary phase a pilot program has already been initiated for developing about 300 women ICT freelancers/entrepreneurs through conducting 10 trainings on Graphic Design/Data Entry/Accounting/etc. in different rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. The target group of the pilot program is 300 grass roots women who have basic computer literacy and passed Secondary School Certificate exam (Grade 10 equivalent). The main objective of this program is to create opportunities for women to be part of the supply chain.



ICT training needs assessment with rural women



ICT Freelancing Training by SME Foundation

With the support of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) SME Foundation, BWIT and a2i has now jointly targeted 3,000 women to develop as ICT entrepreneur/freelancer from all over the country with an emphasize to the remotest and under privileged areas. The target group is the under privileged women with a minimum requirement of S.S.C. (Secondary School Certificate) and basic computer literacy. As a result of this program, some of the women will be developed as ICT freelancer, some of them will be developed as ICT entrepreneurs and some will be as skilled manpower for the ICT sectors. Besides these, a pull of ICT skilled trainers will be developed from the program. The main objective of this program is to develop ICT women freelancer/entrepreneur so that the less educated rural and urban women can engage themselves in income generating activities from home.



ICT women entrepreneurs working in Digital Center



ICT skilled women in their office

SMEF, BWIT and a2i will jointly provide supports to nurture the entrepreneurs and freelancers to sustain in this competitive marketplace. SMEF, BWIT and a2i already initiated the program for providing following supports to nurture them such as:

- a. Create ICT Entrepreneurship for ensuring empowerment of women at the grass root.
- b. Create opportunities for women to be part of the supply chain.
- c. A database will be created highlighting their profiles and the link of this database will be posted on national and other websites. Government and corporate can readily find resources to engage these women in their efforts for inclusiveness and employment
- d. Job fair/match making program will be arranged to create linkage with the members of the 'Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS)' and other similar associations/associations.
- e. Arrange matchmaking events by involving Bankers and ICT entrepreneurs in order to avail collateral free loan at special interest rate from SME Foundations 'credit wholesaling program'
- f. A forum will be created to connect and to develop expertise among themselves.