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Shefalika: A Self-Made Role Model Takes Flight with the LEAN Project



Shefalika Chakma (36) is a resident of Dighalchari village in Rangamati Hill District. A mother of two; her youngest son is mentally handicapped, and Shefalika spends much of her time taking care of him and her two elderly parents.

Shefalika was forced into an arranged marriage at 15 and despite her unwillingness, accepted her family's decision and spent the first few years of her marriage unhappily. After birth of her second child, her husband got married to another woman at which point Shefalika left to move back to her parents. At her parents' family she struggled with poverty and wasn't always able to provide enough food to her family members. In order to earn a little more money, she went to work in a garment factory in Chittagong city in a recommendation of a relative. She worked there for three years and was able to save enough to construct a larger house for her family. But she was forced to leave her job in the city to take care of her aging parents.

Then she started raising chickens and pigs. Received training on mushroom cultivation and tailoring from the Department of Women's Affairs. She tried to keep her family running by working day and night while paying her eldest son's schooling cost and her youngest son's medical treatment.

In November of 2019, Shefalika got involved with the EU funded Leadership to Ensure Adequate Nutrition (LEAN) project in Belaichari. In a session entitled, "Maternal and Child Nutritional Development" she was made aware about LEAN project purpose and vision and saw an opportunity to put her entrepreneurial skills to use. At the end of the session, she approached several other women from Dighalchari and together formulated a plan to put themselves forward as entrepreneurs' group. With her partners, Shefalika launched the Dighalchari Women Business Center (WBC) using BDT 5,000 of her own savings and a loan from a relative. After a brief training from the LEAN project, she led the first awareness campaign on maternal and child nutrition as a way to make her community aware. The WBC is selling targeted nutritious food and agricultural input supplies and clothes. All loans were quickly paid off and Shefalika is now earning enough to support her entire family and further expand her business. She continues the nutrition awareness sessions as an important tool for generating demand for the products at the centre and has also begun programing to prevent child marriage and maternal health.

Shefalika has been recognized as a leader in her community and has been elected as a member of the Multi-Stakeholder Platform in nutrition governance in her region. She hopes that in this new role she will play an even greater role in the development of maternal and child nutrition while acting as a role model for other women to escape from poverty cycle. Shefalika expresses her thanks for the LEAN project for assisting her in realizing her entrepreneurial dreams and hopes that the project will continue its support for other women like her to become self-reliant and independent.

