

Women Find Work with the Help of an Entrepreneur and a “Fighting Fungus”



GKSS employees sieve Tricho-compost to ensure consistency.

In fields and farms of the Bogura District of Bangladesh, entrepreneur Rebaka Sultana is giving an already prolific fungus even more transformative power.

Trichoderma is a beneficial fungus that naturally occurs in all soils. Up close, it resembles wild and overgrown snowflakes, and similarly, embodies a kind of versatility difficult to match. The fungus can be used in liquid or solid form, it attacks harmful soil-borne diseases, assists crops in nutrient and water absorption, strengthens seedlings, and promotes overall crop health and growth. Now, with the help of Sultana's ingenuity, the “fighting fungus” is doing more than fighting crop disease, but fighting for equitable opportunity as well.

Sultana is the Executive Director of Grameen Krishok Sohayok Sangstha (GKSS), a Bangladesh-based organization created to mitigate frequent crop problems like low quality seeds and fertilizers, and to provide a unified space for farmers. One of Sultana's major successes and continued goals is helping women become self-reliant and find job opportunities otherwise not available to them.

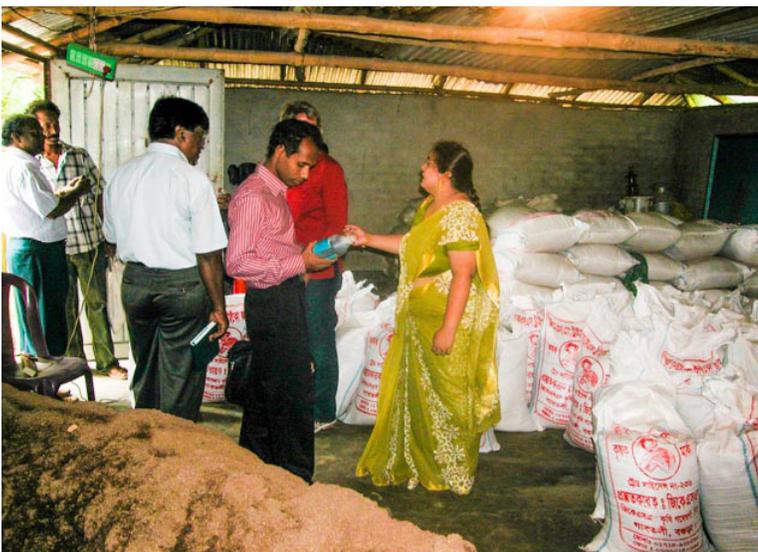
Sultana is the first to sell *Trichoderma* in the form of Tricho-compost, where the fungal culture is added to compost sold in conveniently-packaged bags. She also develops Tricho-leachate, a liquid solution “leached” from Tricho-compost that can be sprayed on leaves, and vermicompost, a kind of composting that uses worms to strengthen soil.

“GKSS has given me a good working environment,” Sultana said. “When I see farmers benefiting due to our initiatives, I feel good.”

Agriculture is the largest sector of employment in Bangladesh; many women, if employed, work solely in home-based agricultural activities.

The composting sector of GKSS employs both salaried men and women. The majority, however, are women. Sultana aims to include small and marginal farmers as contract growers for compost production, where women farmers are given priority. She said that the ability to earn additional income could help women “broaden their way to empowerment both in their families and in society as well.”

Sultana maintains that farmers from all levels are eligible for purchasing compost from GKSS.



Rebaka Sultana speaks with farmers and customers about GKSS products.



Beyond being responsible for her business, Sultana is also involved in the advancement of young women and girls outside of the Bogura District’s agricultural industry. She has established an education center for children from low-income families, an orphanage center for girls, and a center for children who have disabilities.

The Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Integrated Pest Management (IPM IL) has promoted *Trichoderma* for use on small farms in developing countries including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines, and collaborates with the institutions that provide the *Trichoderma* cultures that help GKSS thrive, and women like Sultana achieve independence in an industry where men often dominate powerful positions.

Sometimes, not all is fair in farmer and fungi. Despite *Trichoderma*’s multipurpose qualities, production and commercialization of organic compost comes with many challenges like availability of raw materials, political unrest, *Trichoderma*’s uncommonness as a marketing item, the ability to receive loans, and financial assurance from banks and organizations. Also, since very few businesses in Bangladesh, especially agricultural businesses, are owned and operated by women, navigating uncharted terrain is difficult in itself.

“At least I have been able to prove that this sort of business is possible by a woman,” she said. “Every woman has potential to do better.”

In giving advice to women interested in starting their own businesses, Sultana said, “Trust yourself and go ahead.” To countless others, she need not say much at all, as the truth will soon be blossoming from the ground.

(Top) A GKSS employee manages and monitors compost nourished with *Trichoderma* in a facility that has grown dramatically in size as GKSS has become more productive. (Bottom) Young girls who live in the orphanage Sultana operates place intricate beading on cloths.

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General

The IPM Innovation Lab is housed in the Center for International Research, Education, and Development, a university-wide office at Virginia Tech that supports the university’s international efforts in learning, discovery, and engagement. With a portfolio of close to \$100 million, the office manages projects in 30 countries and partners with 80 NGOs, research organizations, private sector concerns, and governmental organizations.

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