langarkhanas. But the effects of the famine dragged on. As one symptom of the lingering crisis, women continued to beg on the streets of towns and cities across the country. When the government (with international support) introduced food-for-work schemes throughout the country in late 1975 to provide additional relief, women came forward in record numbers.

Women begging on the streets and seeking paid work outside their homes was uncommon in Bangladesh, where social norms have traditionally confined women to their homesteads or, if they need to seek paid work, to the homesteads of others in their villages. Bangladesh had a long history of food-for-work programs in lean employment seasons and after floods, drought, or other crises, but the participation of women was a new phenomenon. The government was simply not prepared to accept women into its rural works programs. Conditioned by tradition to believe women should not seek paid work outside their homes, local officials regularly turned them back.

For the next five years, together with Aminul Alam and other Brac colleagues, I worked closely with Saleha, Boshiron, Shunabon, Sufia, and countless other women, organising local village organisations -- called Shramajibi Mahila Sangstha -- and promoting a set of livelihood activities -- including cow, goat, and poultry rearing; silk production; and embroidery and block printing.

Since late 1975, much has changed for rural women in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh and food aid donors have promoted women's participation in food-for-work by recruiting them more actively, by reserving separate areas or tasks at all sites for women, by adopting separate payment norms for women, and by operating all-women sites. In addition, special food-for-work schemes for women, that involved less heavy lifting, notably roadside tree-planting and road maintenance schemes, have been introduced. Also, the World Food Programme and Brac developed a program whereby food aid was used to subsidise the start-up phase of poultry-rearing by women from poor households. Over the past three decades, hundreds of thousands of women have participated in the special women-only food-for-work schemes, and in the food-subsidised poultry scheme.

More notably, since the mid-1970s, there has been a micro-finance revolution in Bangladesh, with rural women as the main clients. Over the past three decades, small loans have been extended to millions of poor persons and households in villages and slums: women represent the majority of the borrowers. Also notably, since the early 1980s, millions of rural

