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### **An Empowered Young Woman in Bangladesh**

Shahina Akter, 20, is one of some 1,100 young women who have completed training courses offered as part of a UNFPA-supported project in Bangladesh and gone on to start their own businesses. The project aims to alleviate poverty by providing skills training and small business loans, an approach pioneered by the Grameen Bank. (See press release, *Early Marriage and Violence Limit Girls' Opportunities and Violate Their Rights.*)

Her community, Bibir Bazar, decided to concentrate on dress making, basket weaving, poultry farming and raising livestock. "I joined the club out of high school and spent six months learning to make dresses and scarves," she explains. The project also supports other community development activities and a small clinic which provides basic health services including reproductive health and family planning

Intelligent, ambitious and with a flair for business, Shahina took out a small loan and in no time had recruited another 20 girls for her dress making enterprise. She sells her products to stores in nearby Comilla, earning tidy profits. She also trains girls in dress making. "There are no dropouts in my class," she says proudly.

Village incomes have risen considerably as a result of the project, and women now have economic clout, can regulate their fertility, and have fewer, healthier children later than their peers in less-enabling environments.

Locals credit the project with raising the average age of marriage in Bibir Bazar from between 17 and 19 to around 24. The old dowry system has been abandoned entirely. "In this village," explains Shahina, "the girls come to marriage with their own 'dowries', earned themselves. Here we are on more equal terms with men."

Without this project, Shahina says she "would probably have married by 19, had a child already, and remained poor and malnourished."

**Above excerpt is from *The State of World Population 2003 report, Making 1 Billion Count: Investing in Adolescents' Health and Rights*, published by UNFPA, page 57.**