Recordkeeping for Empowerment of Disadvantaged Rural Communities

Viviane Frings-Hessami

Digital Equity Group, Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University, Australia

Viviane.Hessami@monash.edu

The PROTIC project: Information to empower rural Bangladeshi women

The PROTIC project was set up in 2016 by researchers from Monash University, Australia, in collaboration with Oxfam Australia and Oxfam in Bangladesh as a participatory action research project aimed at supporting and empowering Bangladeshi women working in agriculture (https://www.monash.edu/it/protic, [1]).

300 women in three remote locations were provided with smartphones and phone credits to enable them to access information on agricultural topics. Training and regular staff assistance to learn how to use the devices and understand the information they received as part of the project was offered by local partner NGOs, and a telecommunication company, WinMiaki, worked with Oxfam, the local partners and the project participants to design the agricultural information content provided in each area through a dedicated call centre and pushed SMS. The information enabled the women and their communities to use new agricultural techniques to grow vegetables and to start farming prawns and crabs, leading to marked improvements in their livelihoods. A few of them established successful small business ventures (eg. poultry farms, craft enterprises).
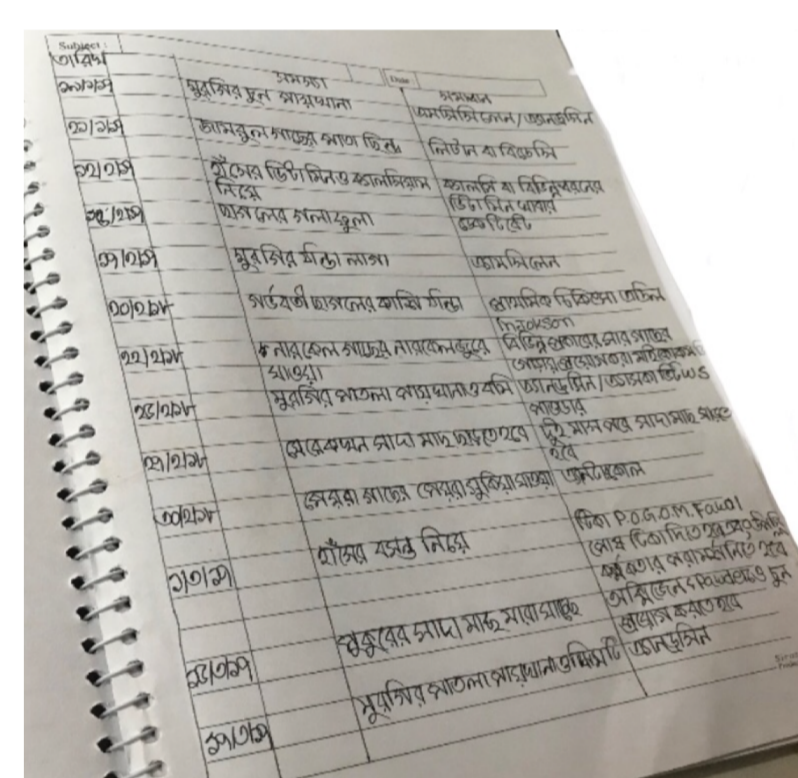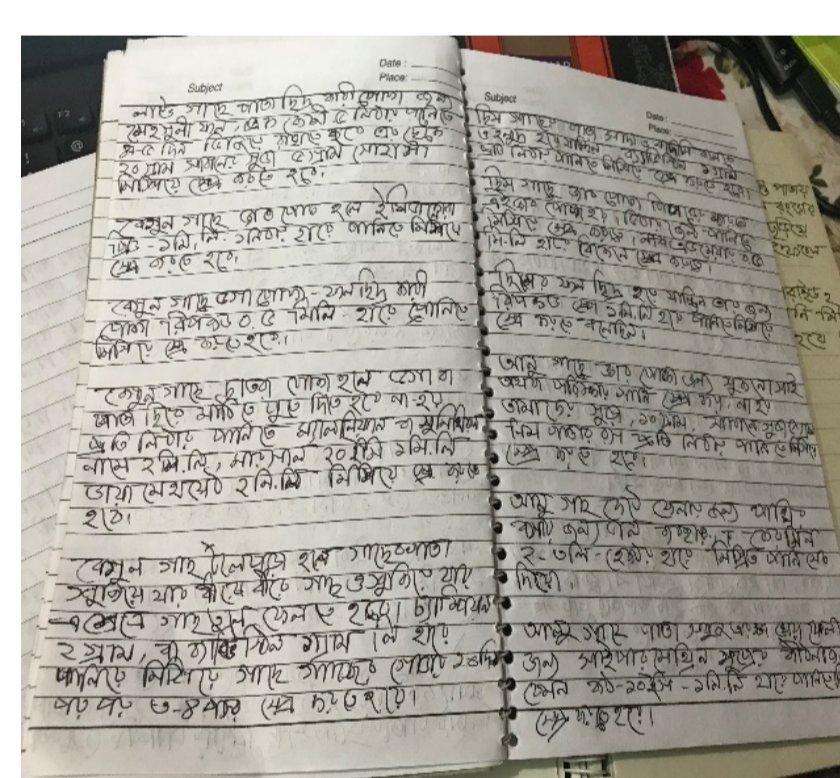

Photo credit: Larry Stillman

Recordkeeping practices of PROTIC women

The project focused on providing access to information. Preservation of the information was not planned for until late in the project [2]. However, our research revealed that the PROTIC women were very conscious of the fragility of the digital technology and of the importance of preserving the information that was provided to them. They took the initiative to preserve the information in analogue formats, writing it in notebooks and on sheets of brown paper that they could hang in their meeting places [3].

The women in the study had low levels of literacy, and rarely used writing skills before taking part in the project but, confronted with the fragility of digital records, they developed recordkeeping practices that better met their needs and they built up their literacy and writing skills.
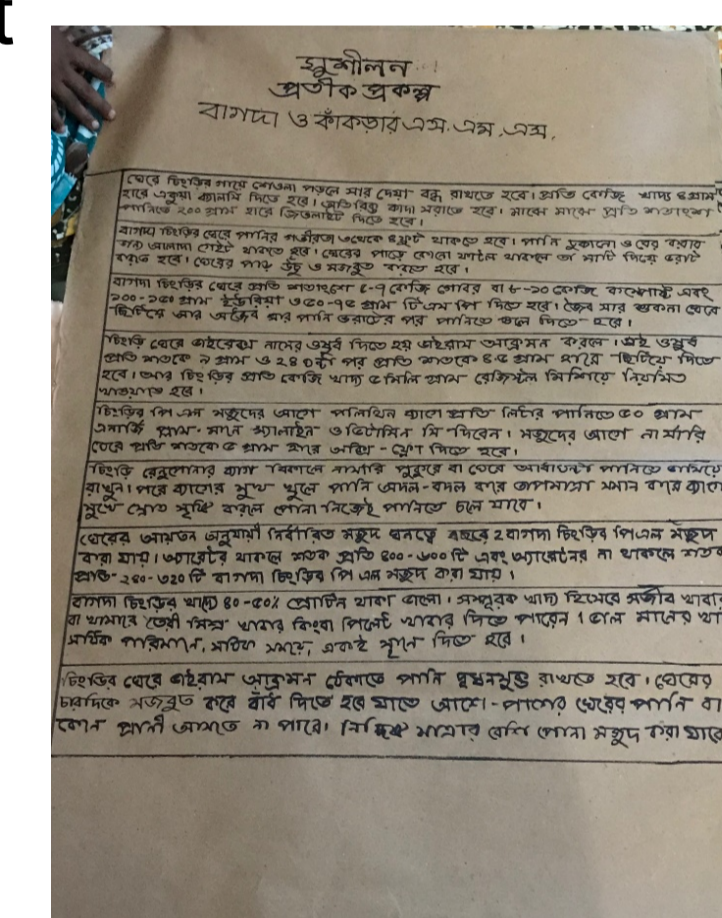

Photos credit: Anindita Sarker

1. Notebooks

Early in the project, the women started writing down the information they got from the call centre in notebooks so that they could reuse the information for themselves, their family, or their neighbours if they faced similar problems again.

Later on, they also started writing down the SMS that were sent to them after some of them lost their stored SMS due to technical problems with their phones or deleted them by mistake.

2. Brown paper sheets

The women also wrote down the texts of the SMS that they received from the call centre on sheets of brown paper that they hung on the wall in the meeting places. The sheet on the right shows the text of SMS about crab and shrimp culture.
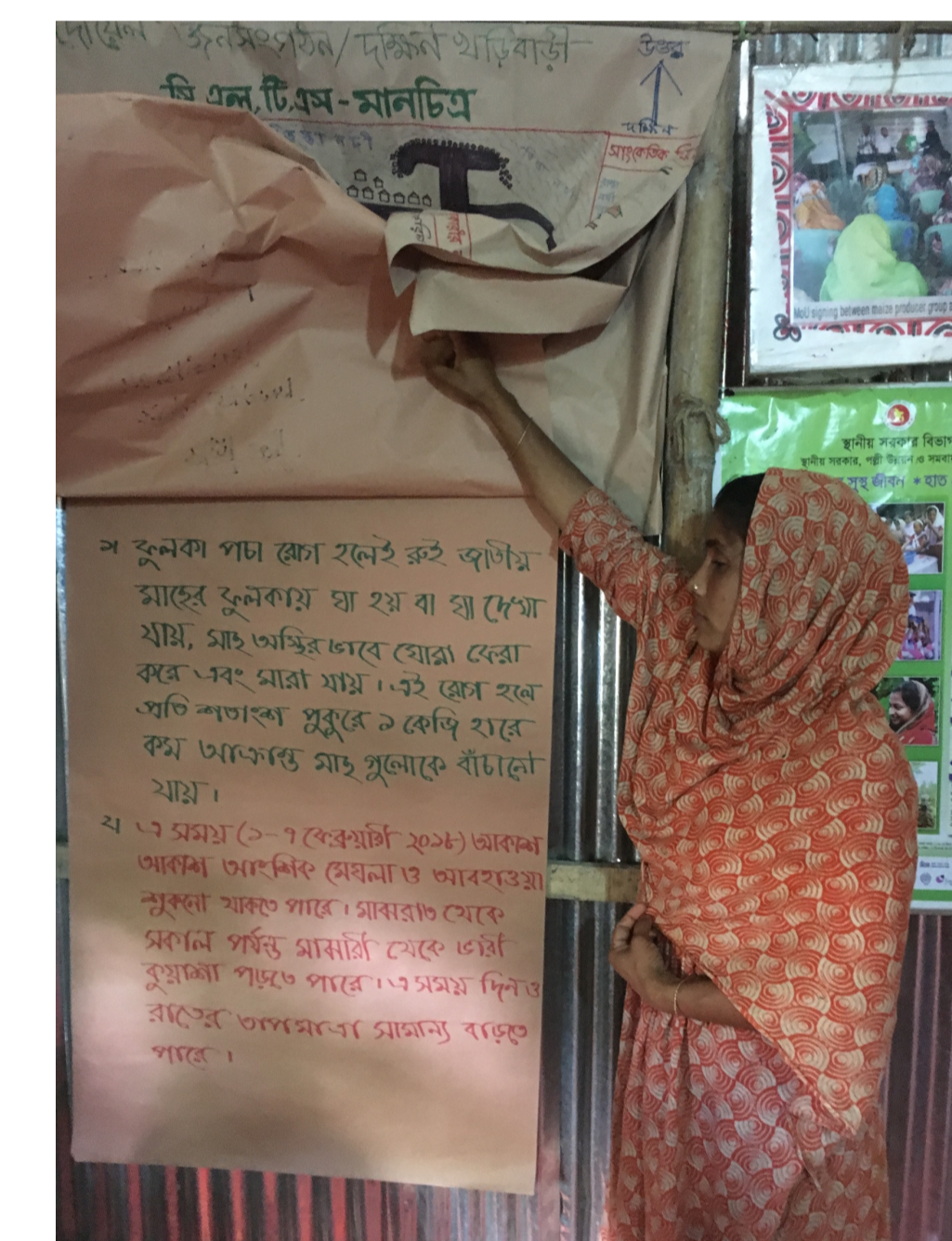

Photos credit: Anindita Sarker

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Recordkeeping for empowerment

The cost of continued access to online services makes it advisable for people with limited resources to capture and preserve the information that they have accessed and that they may need again in the future at a time when they may no longer have access to those services. Given the short life expectancy of digital technologies and the cost of frequent upgrades, in some cases, it may be more appropriate for disadvantaged people to create analogue back-ups of information that they have accessed in digital form, or to create records in analogue formats in the first place.

My research with the PROTIC project has highlighted the need to pay more attention to the ways in which people actually use and preserve information and to the continuing importance of traditional techniques and analogue formats for capturing and preserving information in developing countries.

Recordkeepers of the future will need to be proactive and to intervene at the time of records creation to ensure that disadvantaged communities have access to the records they need, in formats that suit them, in the short, medium and long terms.
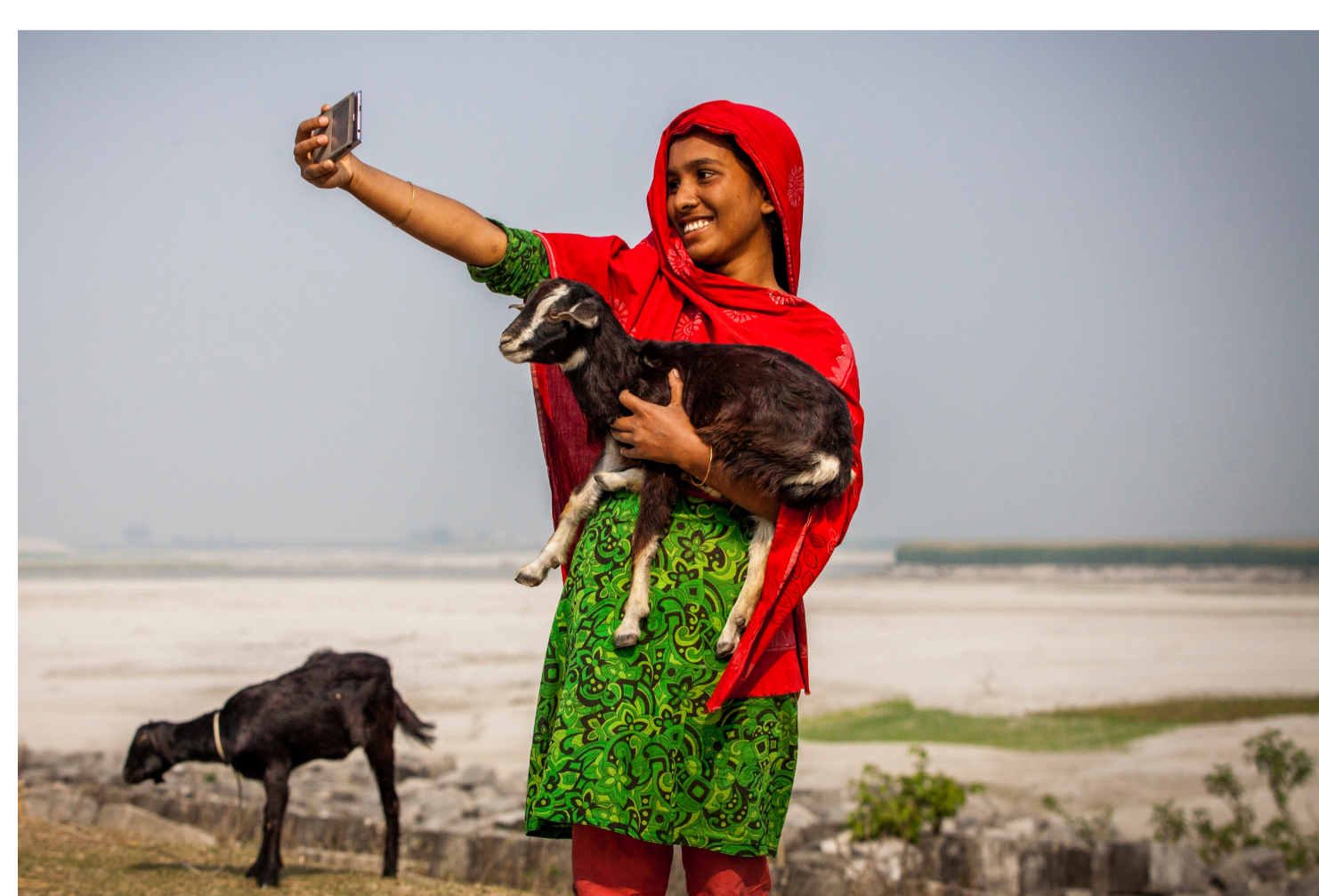

Photo credit: Fahad Kaizer

Future research

➤ What are the preferred formats to preserve information in rural communities?

➤ What are the men's recordkeeping practices?

My future research will investigate how women and men in villages that have been parts of ICT4D initiatives create records to preserve the information provided to them and it will compare their practices with those of people in neighbouring villages who have not been part of ICT4D initiatives to assess how access to information and recordkeeping practices evolved during the same period.

➤ Aim to develop a framework for gender-sensitive and culturally-sensitive information dissemination and preservation programs for rural communities in developing countries .

References

[1] Sarrica M, Denison T, Stillman L, Chakraborty T, Auvi P (2019) 'What do others think?' An emic approach to participatory action research in Bangladesh. AI & Society 34(3):495-508
[2] Anwar M, Frings-Hessami V (2020) Empowering women through access to information: The Sustainability of a community informatics project in Bangladesh. In Sundqvist A. et al. (eds.), iConference 2020, Sustainable Digital Communities, LNCS 12051, 3-14
[3] Frings-Hessami V, Sarker A, Oliver G, Anwar M (2020) Documentation in a community informatics project: The creation and sharing of information by women in Bangladesh. Journal of Documentation 76(2):552-570

PROTIC TEAM

Dr Larry Stillman, Assoc. Prof. Gillian Oliver, Dr Tom Denison, Dr Viviane Frings-Hessami, Dr Misita Anwar
PhD Students: Anindita Sarker, Monisha Biswas, Jigya Khabar, Manika Saha, Rifat Ara Shams
Oxfam in Bangladesh team

MONASH University