Online Freelancing: Eliminating Poverty in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries with 163 million people. While facing many adversities, such as poor infrastructure, political instability, corruption, and insufficient power supplies, Bangladesh has been working diligently to remove the "**Third-World**" adjective from its name over the past few decades. Even then, 49% of the population still remains below the poverty line of US $2 per day. Poverty matters because it affects many factors of growth – education, population growth rates, health of the workforce and public policy. More than two million people in the capital city of Dhaka either live in slums with extreme unhygienic conditions or are without any proper shelter.

In an effort to alleviate the sufferings and to create alternate earning sources for these underprivileged people, I, with two of my like-minded friends (Samaun Afraj Fahim and Mohammad Ashraf Hossain) officially launched our NGO - "[Gontobbo Youth Foundation](#)" with the motto "**Let's Give a Reason to Smile**" in 2015. With more than one thousand volunteers and nine branches across the country, [GYF has impacted the lives of over a hundred thousand people since its inception](#) by creating alternating earning sources (e.g. donating sewing machines, rickshaws) as well as donating emergency rations, clothes and care packages during the difficult times (e.g. winter, Eid, COVID-19).

This summer, our main goal is to empower the vast youth population residing in rural areas - by providing cutting-edge knowledge of online freelancing/ outsourcing. Freelancing includes all types of work such as photo/video editing, word document editing/ translating, web design, audit making, search engine optimisation, etc. It is a unique opportunity for the Bangladeshi youth as the market for freelancing is growing every day and no previous experience is required for the job. It is also possible to earn in this sector in a few days with training. A study by the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) found that Bangladesh is now the second largest country in the world in terms of online labor supply. Although Bangladesh is known for its garment industry which employs millions, it was the third-largest source country for freelancers for the California-based website UpWork (previously known as Elance-ODesk).

For this project, our target area is **Dinajpur** district. This district used to be called the "**Manga**" of North Bangladesh. Manga is a Bengali term referring to the yearly cyclical phenomenon of poverty and hunger in Bangladesh. It is also known for having the largest population of poor people. One of the reasons for choosing this district is that our founder, Samaun Afraj, whose hometown is in Dinajpur, witnessed first-hand the horrific poverty. Secondly, while a limited number of available job opportunities in urban centers may reduce the benefits of policies that encourage rural-urban migration, research shows enormous potential of "**virtual migration**" by training rural youth in Bangladesh to become online freelancers and enabling them to export their labor services to a global online marketplace.

As online freelancing has a very steep learning curve, and most trainees typically drop out of training programs, we have structured a three-month-long training internship with a stipend for participation. Research shows that a small stipend can be enormously beneficial in preventing drop-out of low-income students. After making a payment agreement to hire trainers from **[CreativeIT](#)** (prominent IT training institute in Bangladesh), we will begin admitting participants from underprivileged and low-income families (typically residing in the slums) studying at the local colleges in Dinajpur for our program. A considerable priority will be given to those who dropped out because of being unable to pay the fees. No tuition fees will be charged from our trainees for our program.

The first stepping stone will be establishing a computer lab, as most of the people do not start freelancing due to not being able to afford computers. Upon establishing a lab comprising 20 high end computers at a designated place in Dinajpur (adjacent to the branch office of GYF), around 30-40 students will be enrolled. The program will be conducted in three blocks. During the first month (first block), we will conduct an ESL (English as a Second Language) course alongside teaching basic computer skills such as operating Microsoft Office tools and navigating useful commands. Then notable trainers from CreativeIT will join our team and begin conducting a detailed one month long (second block) training program where our trainees will learn technical skills (especially graphics designing training and useful software using training), and digital marketing skills which are linked to success. CreativeIT has a track record of training and producing over 35,000 freelancers so far. The training will be given three days a

week (TBD) from 9 am to 12 pm. A light snack will be provided by us. During the third block, another month-long extended post-training internship with the trainers will be given, which will provide our trainees additional support in navigating the online marketplace, and in particular, building up their online profiles, and securing jobs through successful bids in online platforms (e.g. **Fiverr, UpWork**) and effective communication with the clients. Certificates will be given upon successful completion of the course. We will also teach them how to get financial aid in premium skill development websites (e.g. **EdX**, **Coursera**) so that they can continue building up their skills at their own pace even after completing our program.

Our success will be measured by immediate results. Even if our trainees don't start earning immediately through outsourcing, they will be able to earn money upon completing our program through running stores that provide digital necessities (e.g. editing, printing, photo/scan copies, poster making) which has a high demand in Bangladesh (especially in the rural areas). In order to establish these stores, there are many microfinance organizations and NGOs that provide small loans without any collateral for rural people (e.g. **Grameen Bank**, **Brac**, **Proshika**, **BEES**). After our program, a workshop will be conducted to provide useful information on how to avail these micro-credit opportunities. We will also keep our lab open three days a week after our program so that our trainees can work from our computers as well for outsourcing/ freelancing. Here our main goal is to create a cycle of producing freelancers each year during the summer. After one cycle, rather than admitting everyone for free, we will start providing financial support to meet full need and allow students to contribute whatever amount they can afford. The fund will be used to increase the lab computers so that we can admit more students. Our studies show that if we can sustain this project for three years, more than five hundred freelancers can be produced from our program, and within seven years, the unemployment rate in Dinajpur can be lessened by over 60 percent.

I was inspired to devise this project particularly from the story of Pervin. In 2012, Pervin, 42, was a self-described housewife of 20 years who wanted to make extra money for her children's education, but couldn't work since her family moved frequently due to her husband's military job. She read about freelance IT jobs in newspapers and then enrolled in short IT courses in Chittagong. Twelve days after creating her profile on ODesk, she got her first job; it paid $5. A year later, Parvin earned $6,000 – not a small sum in a country whose GDP per capita is about $1,800. In 2014, Parvin was named Bangladesh's top female freelancer by BASIS, the country's IT industry association.[1] Inspired by Pevin's story, we have made "**Empowering Women in Bangladesh**", a country where gender discrimination is still widely apparent, one of our project's goals.

Poverty and conflict are widely understood to be closely interconnected – with poverty making countries more prone to civil war, armed conflict weakening governance and economic performance, thus increasing the risk of conflict relapse (Goodhand 2001). Mainstream opinion, in the media and elsewhere, tends to characterize civil conflict as stemming from ancient ethnic hatreds or political rivalries, yet the groundbreaking statistical analysis by the Oxford economist Paul Collier shows that the most powerful predictors of civil conflict are in fact weak economic growth, low incomes, and dependence on natural resources. It is proven that unemployment triggers participation in insurgencies, prompts people to join violent gangs, drives people to extremism, and that it is the primary reason behind domestic violence.

Because the link between economic scarcity and injustice or violence is so high, **GYF** has thrived to work towards the reduction of unemployment and to promote self-dependence in terms of financial needs. By its very definition, ours is a fully non-profit organization, and our projects solely depend on our volunteers' contributions and fundraising events. Our signature event "**2 takar hashi**" (**A smile for a dollar**) encourages economic self-sufficiency where we distribute rickshaws and sewing machines to poor families. Through our annual winter event "**Sharing Happiness**", we have distributed winter clothes to over 30,000 disadvantaged children and destitute people. But even after hosting over 100 events in the span of six years, there have been many times when we eloquently designed a project but could not make it due to lack of funding. This project may also face the same fate if we fail to secure the Davis Project for Peace funding. Henceforth, the chance that I, along with my team, may get the funding this summer motivates me to design this highly impactful project and gives us hope to see a better future for our country.

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[1] https://amyyeewrites.com/2016/04/01/it-freelancing-grows-in-bangladesh/