Towards the end of 1996, AAIT embarked on a project to establish an IT training programme for the women scientists, researchers and technologists of Bangladesh.

**Introduction**

The Association for Advancement of Information Technology (AAIT) is a non-political, non-governmental and non-profit making organisation with the responsibility of coordinating scientific and technological research and training in Bangladesh. Other functions of AAIT are to acquire, store and disseminate scientific and technology information, and, for that purpose hold conferences, symposia, meetings, or workshops or do other things designed to promote interest in science and technology development. For the better performance of these functions, AAIT facilitates regional and international cooperation in scientific research and technology development.

**The AAIT project**

Towards the end of 1996, AAIT embarked up on a project to establish an IT training programme for the women scientists, researchers and technologists of Bangladesh. The association received financial assistance to execute the programme from the Commonwealth Science Council (CSC). The project was based on the fact that a sizeable proportion of women scientists, researchers and technologists are working in the rural areas, but they are disadvantaged and traditionally under-represented. Their knowledge and skills are unrecognised, under used and under valued in science, engineering, technology and particularly in medical fields. As such they are in greater need of upgrading their skills, especially in the fast advancing world of information and communication technologies, which might enable them to connect their global colleagues, and sources of information and global knowledge wherever they may be located.

The CSC awarded a Fellowship to Prof. Lutfor Rahman, the Executive Director of AAIT, to observe a training workshop arranged for women scientists, researchers and technologists of Tanzania by the Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) at Dar es Salam, as a model for developing similar courses in Bangladesh.

**Courses in the capital city**

The first and second stages of the IT training programmes for the women scientists, researchers and technologists of Bangladesh were successfully completed in July 1997 at the Asia Pacific University and at the Centre for Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP), in Dhaka. The course completion reports along with some photographs of the participants in the training programme were sent to the commonwealth secretariat.

The third workshop held at the Institute of Scientific Instrumentation (ISI) laboratory of the University Grants Commission (UGC), Dhaka in May 1998 was also successful under the supervision of chairman of the UGC of Bangladesh.

**Regional courses**

Instead of concentrating the programmes in the capital, the programmers were disseminated in the rural areas. The 4th, 5th and 6th courses specially designed for the women medical doctors and health related scientists were held at the regional cities in cooperation with the Rajshahi University and the Pundra University of Science and Technology at Bogra.

**Work plan and strategies of implementation**

Before embarking on training activities a survey is conducted whose aim is to identify the actual training needs of the scientists in various research and development institutions. Candidates for the courses from the...
These courses have led to the beginning of a team of medical doctors and health related professionals empowered to implement tele-medicine and tele-healthcare across Bangladesh

Institutes are contacted, some by project staff and others by questionnaires.

Interestingly, at the initial stages, most of the participants were found to have no exposure of computers, which is revealed after analysing survey results. They could not learn because of shyness, social and cultural bindings, lack of opportunities and the initiatives taken by the authority. The analysis further revealed that this trend is true at all levels of educational qualifications from diploma to Ph.D.

In order to benefit rural communities, participants are selected from among the applicant’s sciences, physical sciences, social sciences and engineering, from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), private sectors, individuals, and service institutions and semi-governmental institutions. The representation covered various national economics especially health, environment, education, natural resources (mineral resources), energy, industry, agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Special care was taken in selection of the participants so that maximum number of organisations and individuals benefit from the programme.

The idea and its implementation have been appreciated not only by the scientists but also by the chief executives (employers) of the candidates as well as policy makers and politicians. This was revealed by the cooperation extended by them to the project team during preparation and execution of the project.

Further acceptance of the programme as confirmed by midterm evaluation whose aim was to find out how useful the programme has been. Women scientists who had participated in the training courses and their employers were visited at their work places, and the results were that the programme was found very useful and 92 per cent of the respondents have been applying the knowledge acquired from the programme in their respective fields of research.

Employers from the rural areas were highly impressed by the output of the computer related assignments given to the programme participants and indicated that they would wish to have more of their staff attend the courses in the programme.

Output of the programme

The programme produced a group of women scientists, researchers and health related professionals with following skills:

- Women scientists who are well conversant with the computer mediated communication (e.g. E-mail, Internet etc.)
- Women participants who are computer literate and can work comfortably with standard application packages (e.g. word processing, database management, spread sheet analysis)
- Women scientists who can use special software packages relevant to their activities (e.g. Bio-statistical packages, statistical analysis)
- Scientists with knowledge of conducting data base searches on CD-ROMs and use of multimedia facility to integrate available information on CD-ROM and other sources.
- Increased interaction among the women scientists with computer knowledge facilitated through a network of alumni of this programme
- A team of competent IT trainers who ensure sustainability of the programme
- An established IT training programme for rural communication development in AAIT.

Conclusions

These courses have led to the beginning of a team of medical doctors and health related professionals empowered to implement tele-medicine and tele-healthcare across Bangladesh. Indigenous Science and Technology at Ikrlal (ISTI) resource centre is one such centre that works as a knowledge centre for education, health care and information source for the community of 10,000 people. ISTI is located in at a remote village and surrounded by seven villages. The whole area is a river island in the form of a circle. ISTI is at the centre of the circular shaped area. The other villages are on the periphery of the circle and within the distance of two kilometres. The people of the community enjoy benefit of ISTI resource centre equally because of short distance.

ISTI resource centre has bought about a tremendous change in the region in the field of education, health and other aspects. Lives of many people are now saved from sure deaths due to awareness about health care and nutrition.

The other achievement is the formation of STAR (Scientists, Technologists And Researchers) association for the women of the regional community at Bogra. The members of the association are mainly women scientists, technologists and researchers who are at the moment unemployed and unmarried. They are making excellent examples in the community through utilisation of their skills and talents.