

# Internet rolls into Bangladesh villages on a bike

November 2 2012, by Farid Hossain

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In this Sept. 30, 2012 photo, Sathi Akhtar, a 29-year-old Bangladeshi woman known as Tattahakallayani or Info Lady shows a 15-minute video played in a laptop at one of their usual weekly meetings at Saghata, a remote impoverished farming village in Gaibandha district, 120 miles (192 kilometers) north of capital Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dozens of "Info Ladies" bike into remote Bangladeshi villages with laptops and Internet connections, helping tens of thousands of people - especially women - get everything from government services to chats with distant loved ones. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)

Amina Begum had never seen a computer until a few years ago, but now she's on Skype regularly with her husband. A woman on a bicycle brings the Internet to her.

Dozens of "Info Ladies" bike into remote Bangladeshi villages with laptops and [Internet connections](#), helping tens of thousands of people—especially women—get everything from [government services](#) to chats with distant loved ones. It's a vital service in a country where only 5 million of 152 million people have Internet access.

The Info Ladies project, created in 2008 by local development group D.Net and other [community organizations](#), is modeled after a program that helped make cellphones widespread in Bangladesh. It intends to enlist thousands more workers in the next few years with startup funds from the South Asian country's central bank and expatriates working around the world.

D.Net recruits the women and trains them for three months to use a computer, the Internet, a printer and a camera. It arranges [bank loans](#) for the women to buy bicycles and equipment.



In this Sept. 30, 2012, photo, Bangladeshi Info Ladies pedal their way from one place to another at Saghata, a remote impoverished farming village in Gaibandha

district, 120 miles (192 kilometers) north of capital Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dozens of "Info Ladies" bike into remote Bangladeshi villages with laptops and Internet connections, helping tens of thousands of people - especially women - get everything from government services to chats with distant loved ones. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)

"This way we are providing jobs to jobless women and at the same time empowering villagers with critical information," said Ananya Raihan, D.Net's executive director.

The women—usually undergraduates from middle-class rural families—aren't doling out charity. Begum pays 200 takas (\$2.40) for an hour of Skype time with her husband, who works in [Saudi Arabia](#).

Begum smiles shyly when her husband's cheerful face pops up. With [earphones](#) in place, she excitedly tells him she received the money he sent last month. He asks her to buy farm land.

Even Begum's elderly mother-in-law now uses Skype to talk with her son.

"We prefer using [Skype](#) to mobile phones because this way we can see him on the screen," Begum said, beaming happily from her tiny farming village in Gaibandha district, 120 miles (192 kilometers) north of the capital, Dhaka.



In this Sept. 30, 2012, photo, a group of Bangladeshi girls, aged between 12 and 17, hold courtyard meeting to learn about menstruation, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and use of contraceptives at Saghata, a remote impoverished farming village in Gaibandha district, 120 miles (192 kilometers) north of capital Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dozens of "Info Ladies" bike into remote Bangladeshi villages with laptops and Internet connections, helping tens of thousands of people - especially women - get everything from government services to chats with distant loved ones. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)

In the neighboring village of Saghata, an Info Lady is 16-year-old Tamanna Islam Dipa's connection to social media.

"I don't have any computer, but when the Info Lady comes I use her laptop to chat with my Facebook friends," she said. "We exchange our class notes and sometimes discuss social issues, such as bad effects of child marriage, dowry and sexual abuse of girls."



The Info Ladies also provide a slew of social services—some for a fee and others for free.



In this Sept. 30, 2012 photo, "Info Ladies" pedal their way to Saghata, a remote impoverished farming village in Gaibandha district, 190 kilometers (120 miles) north of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dozens of "Info Ladies" bike into remote Bangladeshi villages with laptops and Internet connections, helping tens of thousands of people \_ especially women - get everything from government services to chats with distant loved ones. They've expanded access to vital computer services in a country where only 5 million of 152 million people have Internet access. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)

They sit with teenage girls where they talk about primary health care and taboo subjects like menstrual hygiene, contraception and HIV. They help villagers seeking government services write complaints to authorities under the country's newly-enacted Right to Information Act.

They talk to farmers about the correct use of fertilizer and insecticides. For 10 takas (12 cents) they help students fill college application forms online. They're even trained to test blood pressure and blood sugar levels.

"The Info Ladies are both entrepreneurs and public service providers," Raihan said.



In this Sept. 30, 2012, photo, Bangladeshi woman Shemoli Rani Das listens at their usual weekly meetings at Saghata, a remote impoverished farming village in Gaibandha district, 120 miles (192 kilometers) north of capital Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dozens of "Info Ladies" bike into remote Bangladeshi villages with laptops and Internet connections, helping tens of thousands of people - especially women - get everything from government services to chats with distant loved ones. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)

Raihan borrowed the idea from Bangladeshi Nobel laureate Muhammad

Yunus, who in 2004 introduced mobile phones to rural women who had no access to telephones of any kind, by training and sending out scores of "Mobile Ladies" into the countryside.

That hugely successful experiment drew in commercial mobile phone operators. Now more than 92 million people in Bangladesh have cellphone access.

Nearly 60 Info Ladies are working in 19 of Bangladesh's 64 districts. By 2016, Raihan hopes to train 15,000 women.

In July, Bangladesh's central bank agreed to offer interest-free loans to Info Ladies. Distribution of the first phase of loans, totaling 100 million takas (\$1.23 million), will begin in December. Raihan said D.Net is also encouraging the large population of Bangladeshi [expatriates](#) to send money home to help Info Ladies get started.



In this Sept. 30, 2012, photo, Bangladeshi Info Lady Mehedi Akthar Misty, right, helps Amina Begum, 45, to talk with her husband with Skype at Jharabarsha, in a remote impoverished farming village in Gaibandha district, 120 miles (192 kilometers) north of capital Dhaka, Bangladesh. Begum had never seen a computer until a few years ago, but now she's on Skype regularly with her husband. A woman on a bicycle brings the Internet to her. Dozens of "Info Ladies" bike into remote Bangladeshi villages with laptops and Internet connections, helping tens of thousands of people - especially women - get everything from government services to chats with distant loved ones. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)

"It's very innovative," says Jamilur Reza Chaudhury, a pioneer of information technology education in Bangladesh. "The project is really having an impact on the people at grass-root level."

Info Lady Sathi Akhtar, who works in Begum's and Dipa's villages, said she makes more at the job than she would as a school teacher. She said that after making payments on her 120,000 taka (\$1,480) loan and covering other costs, she takes home an average of 10,000 takas (\$123) a month.

"We are not only earning money, we are also contributing in empowering our women with information. That makes us happy."

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