

# UNITED NATIONS JOINT PROGRAMME ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Joint Programme: UN Joint Programme on Violence against Women, Bangladesh

MDG-F Thematic Window: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Main Participants: UN: ILO, IOM, UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, WHO. Government agencies: Ministry of Education (MOE), Local Government & Rural Development (LGRD), Ministry of Expatriate Welfare & Overseas Employment (MoEWOE), Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoH&FW), Ministry of Information (MoI), Ministry of Labour & Employment (MoLE), Ministry of Law, Justice & Parliamentary Affairs (MoLJPA), Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), Ministry of Women & Children Affairs (MoWCA), Ministry of Youth & Sports (MoYS).



Empowering Vulnerable Women



## 1. Introduction

The Joint Programme on Violence against Women (the Programme) aimed to contribute to the long term sustainable socioeconomic development of rural Bangladesh through poverty alleviation in rural areas, and by supporting poor women under development programmes as indicated in the Bangladesh Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and based on its commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Programme has encouraged the adoption and implementation of policies for preventing violence and supporting survivors by enhancing the capacities of the government, improving information (data) and providing support to NGOs and civil society. It has also invested in changing the attitudes and behaviour of men, women, boys and girls to reduce violence against women (VAW) and discriminatory practices such as dowry, early marriage and trafficking. In addition, it has supported the extension of services for survivors of gender-based violence with immediate care, relief and rehabilitation through a comprehensive package including the expansion, renovation and improvement of the existing shelter system in select programme intervention sites.

## 2. Initial Situation

When the programme began, organizations responsible for ensuring access to services - the Union Parishad<sup>1</sup> standing committees on Women and Child Welfare, Culture and Sports - were inactive. Furthermore, the funds for the District Legal Aid Committees (DLAC), which were allocated to ensure legal services to survivors of violence, were going unused. There was a lack of communication between the Union Parishad standing committees, human rights organizations at national and district levels and the DLAC.

Analysis also demonstrated that survivors did not have information about the facilities provided by the government and NGOs, and that the majority

of women were not aware of their rights. As a result, they were unable to obtain necessary support. The Government of Bangladesh and other organizations also had inadequate systems for providing information on services and rights, nor were these systems enabled to collect prevalence data, record the number of cases filed or track the causal factors linked to VAW. Consequently, the problem remained unaddressed.

In the seven districts where UNFPA worked with the Ministry of Women & Children Affairs (MoWCA), there was no shelter available where survivors of violence could obtain holistic support. Women and girls were not able to come forward to speak against the perpetrators, as abuse and violence against women, particularly domestic violence, were generally perceived as a private matter.

## 3. Strategy

An objective of the Programme was to develop a mechanism to set up effective linkages between different service providers and the survivors, as the main concern was that while there were agencies with resources available to provide support, they were unable to benefit survivors due to lack of information. The Programme focused on building the capacities of the Union Parishad standing committees (UP-SC) on Women and Child Welfare, Culture and Sports, in collaboration with the DLAC, to ensure the provision of legal services to female survivors among marginalized groups. A database was piloted in 44 unions under six upazilas (sub-districts) in six project districts, with information on women survivors of violence and the services provided. The database was compiled with upazila-based information and first shared with the respective Upazila Women's Affairs Officers. It was then further analysed and shared with the respective District Women Affairs Officers.

Recognizing the consequences of violence against women on poverty reduction interventions, the Programme linked with the programmes Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets

<sup>1</sup> The smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh.

(REOPA)<sup>2</sup> and The Local Governance Support Project: Learning and Innovation Component (LGSP-LIC) (two projects implemented by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives together with UNDP) to address the issue of gender-based violence. The project was implemented in Barguna, Habiganj, Narsingdi, Feni, Satkhira, and Sirajganj districts until June 2013 by BRAC<sup>3</sup> as the technical and field implementation partner.

An important objective of the Programme was to empower rights holders, especially rural women, and including vulnerable groups, by increasing access to justice through capacity-building and sensitization, awareness building and mobilization of communities. The targeted rights holders included members of REOPA WCG (Women Crew Groups—women employed under the social safety net scheme) and also local communities.

Another objective was to build the capacities of duty bearers by activating and building the capacity of two nationally mandated committees (UP-SC and DLAC headed by District Judges) for rendering support to survivors; enhancing capacities for the local level government officials, Union Facilitation Teams (Local Youth) and Women Development Forum members (elected UP women leaders) for providing support and care for women and girls who are vulnerable, and/or have survived violence; and supporting the establishment of linkages between UP-SC and human rights organizations at national and district levels.

It also invested in significant community outreach efforts, including through the effective use of community theater to reach large populations, many of whom are illiterate.

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2 REOPA is a social safety net project that works to provide employment primarily to vulnerable rural women through road maintenance projects. It currently employs 24,440 such women to work in groups of 33 on project sites nationwide. Women are selected through a lottery after they have been short-listed as destitute, socially marginalized and unable to meet the basic food needs of themselves or their families.

3 BRAC is an international NGO whose mission is to “empower people and communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, disease and social injustice. Our interventions aim to achieve large scale, positive changes through economic and social programmes that enable men and women to realise their potential”.

## 4. Progress and Results

In order to address issues related to data and information needs, a VAW database was piloted in the six districts of the project. The database is building an evidence base regarding the violence affecting women in 44 unions under six Upazilas of six districts. The Women Development Forum, Union Facilitation Teams (Local Youth), members of REOPA Women Crew Group and the BRAC Palli Shomaj (Village Federation) are collecting field data. This information is compiled by BRAC as the field partner and then shared with the respective Upazila and District Women Affairs Officers. One aim was to strengthen the coordination of information between the demand side (community members, UP/UZ<sup>4</sup> Standing Committee, UZ/District Women Affairs Offices) and the supply side (DLAC and District Administration including police, hospitals, shelter homes, BRAC and other NGOs). The pilot testing intervention under the project has actively involved the respective six Upazila Women Affairs Officers (UWAOs) and the corresponding six District Women Affairs Officers (DWAOs) who are currently reporting monthly on VAW incidents to the district administration and to the central level.

As a result of this pilot initiative, data have been collected on the number and type of incidents (such as acid attacks, rape, murder, physical torture, dowry, early marriage, family conflict, suicide and hilla marriage<sup>5</sup>) as well as type of support provided (such as court cases by DLAC, counselling and legal aid by BRAC, shalish<sup>6</sup> by the UP, and others). From September 2012 through May 2013, a total of 811 incidents were reported from 44 unions and have been included in the pilot database.

Working through the REOPA programme allowed direct access to the Women Crew Group (WCG) members, many of whom endured various forms of violence in their lives. Over 97 per cent (23,638) of WCG members received training as a part of the BRAC Community Empowerment Programme,

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4 Upazila, second lowest level of local government.

5 Temporary, often forced marriages.

6 Traditional system for informal dispute resolution.

including medical aid, counselling and rehabilitation. They were also made aware of their rights under Bangladeshi law, and that common cultural practices such as beatings or child marriages are illegal. Over 23,800 REOPA WCG members received a service card each with a hotline number and information related to obtaining immediate support if faced with violence. As a result of their participation in the training, the women have become aware of issues such as gender-based discrimination; the concept, categories and causes of violence against women; steps to take for prevention and protection against violence; and relevant laws. A positive outcome of the training was that 90 per cent of the participants reported understanding that women must be free from these injustices in order to fully enjoy their rights and to effectively participate in society. After receiving the training, the WCG members also reported becoming more confident about asserting their rights. They are combating violence in their own lives, as well as in the lives of others.

Capacity-building activities also targeted District-level officials and were attended by District Commissioners, Additional District Commissioners, Upazila Executive Officers, police superintendents, civil surgeons and judges. Over 4,900 district, Upazila and local government officials and members received sensitization and capacity-building support so that they could provide counselling and survivor support.

Over 4,900 UP members received training on VAW issues. All of the male UP members participated in this training. The objective of the training was to sensitize elected representatives about gender-based discrimination and violence against women in the family and society, so they have the capacity to prevent violence and be able to take effective steps to provide emergency support to survivors. Before the training the members were not interested in attending because they felt that VAW was not an issue of concern. They believed the training to be only for women and that there was nothing relevant for them to discuss about VAW. Gradually, upon becoming better informed about gender-based discrimination, they became more aware about discrimination and VAW issues in their personal, family,

as well as community lives. UP members have since made commitments to assist survivors of VAW and to continue discussions on VAW prevention with community members.

The capacities of 2,335 local youth (Union Facilitation Team members) and 1,003 elected women leaders on VAW have been enhanced so that they can act as whistleblowers in their communities to bring justice for the poor women who do not know what actions to take if a survivor of violence approaches them and solicits support. They have also become sensitized about different laws related to violence against women in Bangladesh and are now able to give guidance and aid to the survivors through knowledge of immediate measures to take in cases of violence and about the types of facilities available.

Popular theatre was used in this programme as a tool for information dissemination to the rural population. BRAC staff assisted local artists to develop community dramas focused on the issue of violence against women. Over 535 village level popular dramas on VAW, human rights and women empowerment were staged where 178,629 community members attended and heard key messages on how to respond to VAW.

Key results of the interventions include:

1. 100 per cent of marriages have been registered (total 15,511)
2. 1,056 community members solicited legal, medical and counselling services
3. 858 family conflicts have been resolved
4. 243 early marriages have been stopped

## 5. Lessons Learned and Challenges

- Concerted efforts and support from different actors are key for stopping violence against women. Success depends on strong linkages between women's groups, local government bodies and national government services.
- It is important to provide typically excluded women with information regarding the availability of services and assistance in their areas.

- Working through existing networks, such as those developed around the REOPA, helps to leverage resources and to maximize results.
- Popular Theatre is an effective tool for information dissemination, awareness building and increasing the knowledge base of rural populations on various socio-economic issues that affect their lives and to mobilize women and men against social ills and injustices.
- There is no alternative to government institutions for ensuring sustainability of project outcomes. Much can be achieved through strengthening the capacity of all government offices working on VAW.
- Involvement of the district authority, who plays a convening role of the concerned Government officials from different sectors and promotes positive attitudes toward sharing responsibilities, is the driving force for delivering the utmost support required to the survivors of violence.
- Service provision and community mobilization go hand in hand, so that local people become more aware of women's right issues and seek service to redress the VAW.
- Identification and celebration of positive masculine practices toward women's empowerment and facilitation of community dialogue hold potential to instill self-reflexive practices among participating men to bring positive changes in their communities.

## 6. Sustainability and Potential Application

- **Developing a national VAW database:** Continue creation of a credible database on VAW in Bangladesh, including completion of the Policy Dialogue on the National Database on VAW in order to highlight key national achievements, challenges and the way forward based on studies, findings and field experience.
- **The importance of reaching out to rural areas:** Increase popular theatre and dramas in order to have a greater impact on information dissemination on ending VAW, as popular theatre and dramas have proven to be extremely effective.
- **Capacity-building of government staff at community level:** Promote the application of lessons learned through follow up trainings, which provide an opportunity for members to share their experiences, as well as to reinforce the content learned.

## 7. Main sources

- Hardcopy booklet on VAW, database mapping, case studies (which will include a multimedia CD with all the relevant documents, tools and manuals)
- Active database on VAW
- Lessons from the implementation of the MDG-F Joint Programme to address Violence Against Women in Bangladesh (forthcoming)