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# LEARNING<sup>4</sup>CHANGE

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## Plan International Bangladesh OFFICES

### Plan International Bangladesh Country Office

Houses CWN (B) 14  
Road 35, Gulshan 2, Dhaka 1212  
Bangladesh  
Tel: + 88-02-8832172-74, 8826209,  
8817589, 9860167  
Fax: +880-2-9861599  
E-mail: plan.bangladesh@plan-international.org

### Northern Operational Support Unit

Canada House  
Airport Road  
Saidpur, Nilphamari  
Tel: +88-05526-72387, 72964  
Fax: + 88-05526-72580

### Dhaka Programme Unit

House 62, Block KA  
Pisciculture Housing Society  
Shymoli, Mohammadpur  
Dhaka - 1207  
Tel: + 88-02-9122966, 8123079  
Fax: + 88-9120529

### Gazipur Programme Unit

Hospital Road, Sreepur  
Gazipur  
Tel: +88-06825-51512

### Dinajpur Programme Unit

Goaldihi, Khanshama  
Dinajpur  
Tel: + 88-01711620772

### Lalmonirhat Programme Unit

Tong Bhanga UP Road, Hatibandha  
Lalmonirhat  
Tel: + 88-05923-56125

### Nilphamari Programme Unit

Nilphamari Road, Joldhaka  
Nilphamari  
Tel: + 88-05524-64040

### Barguna Project Office

Khan Bhaban (Ex-Palli Biddut Office)  
Ground Floor, South Monoshatoli  
Lakurtala (east side of the sluice gate)  
Barguna Sadar



[www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org)



Reaching Girls and Young Women





## COUNTRY DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

A warm welcome to Plan International Bangladesh's second issue of our bi-annual publication, Learning 4 Change. We are pleased to bring you this publication every six months to share our learning and evidence on issues affecting children in Bangladesh. This second issue focuses on girls and young women.

We know that girls are our biggest resource if we want to reach our development goals. With girls and women making up approximately half of the population, we cannot ignore the particular development challenges they face to reach their potential, which ultimately result in developmental setbacks for the nation.

This issue will examine three areas that affect girls and young women. Primarily, norms and customs which place women in a subservient position have been reflected upon. The shocking result of girls and women internalizing the negative and harmful treatment they receive as acceptable, such as rape by their husbands, is explored. Learning from Plan International Bangladesh's programme on child marriage is shared. We know that we have the highest rate of child marriage in Asia and the third highest in the world, forcing many girls to reduce their life chances in health, education and economic opportunities, robbing them of their childhoods. Yet the practice continues today. However, there are key strategies that have been proven to work to reduce the prevalence.

Finally, disasters are a time when girls face additional pressures and complexities in their situation compared to boys. A study based on an existing Plan



International Bangladesh project in the coastal area of Barguna highlights the abuse, harassment and violation of rights faced by girls during an emergency situation.

If we do not learn from these findings, if we do not include additional measures to address the issues girls and young women face in our programming through a robust analysis, we will never be able to support girls to progress further and realize the heights which they are destined to reach.

As we wish for a brighter future for Bangladesh, let us not forget the girls and young women with whom lies the key. If we can give them the space and opportunity to stand up and speak out, they will surely shine. We are also pleased to include a story of a young girl who, when given the opportunity, was able to turn her life around despite the odds being against her. Girls are not passive victims, they are change agents. Let's believe in them.

I hope this issue provides you all with the important learning it has provided us here at Plan International Bangladesh. Together we can make a difference.

**Elena Ahmed**  
Interim Country Director  
Plan International Bangladesh

CONTENT ADVISOR: ELENA AHMED

EDITOR: TONY MICHAEL GOMES

EDITORIAL BOARD: IFTEKHAR A CHOWDHURY (CONSULTANT) AND SHAMIM AHSAN KHAN

DESIGN: MUNTASIR MAMUN/KEWKRADONG BANGLADESH

PHOTOGRAPHS: BASHIR AHMED SUJON, SAIKAT, KUNTAL D COSTA

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A young girl with dark hair, wearing a bright red headscarf, is holding a baby. The girl has a small gold nose ring and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The baby, who has dark hair, is wearing a blue and white striped shirt and is also looking towards the camera. They are outdoors, with a blurred background showing some greenery and a wooden structure.

# Learning From Stop Child Marriage Programme

-An assessment of progress with learning on Plan International Bangladesh's drive to end child marriage in its working areas.

ABDUL QUADER



## INTRODUCTION

CHILDREN REPRESENT THE MOST vulnerable members of society with an inadequate legal system offering little or no protection from the abuses they suffer. One such instance of abuse that children, particularly female children suffer is the incidence of child marriages. Child marriage is a result of poverty, gender inequality, lack of protection for females, lack of education and employment opportunities, existence of socio-cultural norms and inadequate marital laws.

According to the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, a child is someone who is 18 (in case of a female) or who is 21 (in case of a male); these are the minimum legal age limits for marriage.

The incidence of child marriage is affected by the location of the female's family, her educational attainment at the time of marriage and involvement in any job at the time of marriage. According to a national survey conducted by Plan and ICDDR,B in 2012\*\*, the incidence of child marriage is higher when the female is from the rural areas (71% for rural areas compared to 54% for urban areas), the female has no educational qualifications at the time of marriage (86% for the uneducated compared to 26% of those with some level of education), the female has no job at the time of marriage (57% for the employed compared to 70% for the unemployed). The incidence of child marriages has diminished over the years – 64% of the young women surveyed (aged 20-24) were married before the age of 18 compared to the earlier rate of 71%. However, NGO and government efforts are still not sufficient to drastically change the child marriage scenario.

The primary reasons for the incidence of child marriage are the perceptions of women in society, marriage being seen as a form of

security, societal pressure on daughters to get married off early, poverty and absence of sufficient marital laws designed to protect female children.

Females are expected to occupy positions in society, which are subordinate to males and these are typically the positions of mothers, wives and caregivers. Thus, from an early age, the decision regarding her future lies in the hands of parents and relatives. The period a female spends in her parents' home is a period of investment on the future, which is more often her preparation for the marriage market; thus the roles parents play are to arrange her marriage and protect her chastity before marriage. This pressure is increased further by the relationship between the groom's dowry and the female's age – the higher the female's age, the higher the dowry. Thus, for poverty-stricken families the best bet is to get daughters married off early.

The traditional structure of society also demands that males live with their families while brides move in with their in-laws. As a result, there is the greater stimulus to marry a daughter off early (so that she can go and live with her in-laws), resulting in a smaller family size and lower financial pressure in an already poverty-stricken family. In such cases, educating a daughter represents a long term benefit but something that requires financial investment on her for a longer time. When chalked up against the short term benefit of marrying her off early and having one less mouth to feed, educating a daughter clearly becomes the less attractive option. Marriage is seen as a way of protecting the daughter from sexual abuse, hunger, a way to safeguard honour in the face of sexual assault, etc. Moreover, these instances of sexual and physical abuse increase drastically during and after natural calamities. Protection of children is further

undermined by weak, insufficient and inadequate child laws that do not offer much protection to children during disaster. There is also the problem of contradiction that exists within the law itself. While the Children Law defined the age to be 18; the Child Marital Law uses different ages for different sexes (18 for females and 21 for males). This in turn presents a barrier when monitoring child marriages using the Children Law. Parents falsely increase the age of their daughters to marry them off when confirming the age during marriage. Marriage registrars do not go beyond listening to parents' statements to verify the age before marriage and such cases make it difficult to count the number of cases of child marriage under legislation.

Since 1994, Plan International Bangladesh has been working to create a strong and rigorous child protection system within communities to prevent violence, exploitation and abuse on children. Through this defense mechanism, Plan has worked successfully to reduce instances of child marriages. This has been done primarily through birth registration, facilitation of Union Parishads and creation of a social movement that rose up against child marriage from within the community. Plan started its facilitation of UPs by taking advantage of the birth registration campaign in 2005, which documents the exact birth date of an infant. This has prevented parents and other parties from falsely increasing the age of a child to marry her off. With the advent of online registration, the situation has improved further. Instead of working at higher levels of government authority, Plan has worked very deeply with the community, working at the lowest tiers of the government (Union Parishads) for maximum impact. Through Plan's facilitation, school management committees, non-government

organizations, children organizations, community based organizations, child protection groups, marriage registrars, teachers, religious leaders and elites have all emerged as key people and institutions involved in preventing and reducing child marriages.

Capacity building programmes targeting the masses have led to increased awareness on different existing issues and have gone a long way to influence marital decision making within the family. This has been done primarily through Theatre for Development, rally, meetings, day observation, debate competition, proclamation by mike, signature campaign, oath sessions, trainings, hanging banner-festoon and signboard. Now child protection groups (which inform the public about child marriages, child rights violation, gender, child marriage and birth registration and act as watch dog bodies in the community to stop child marriages) work closely with 'Women and Children Representation Preventive Standing Committee' of UPs. Any case of a child marriage is reported to the committee. These child protection groups then try their best to stop these marriages and often go to the Upazila Executive Officer for aid. Many female children are associated with anti-child marriage activities of NGOs which have taught them the consequences of early marriages and the legal age of marriage. Many of these children work as peer promoters and they have birth registration certificates. Many of these female children go on to prevent marriages of their peers by persuading families, by persuading the bride to decline the proposal and by seeking support from UP, UNO and police stations. This often causes parents to postpone the marriage. Oftentimes, areas which become child marriage free zones become role models for surrounding areas to replicate.



## LEARNING FROM PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

Child participation in reducing child marriages provides an effective method by which many instances of child marriages have been prevented. Children can share their own experiences with community members which can widely sensitize them about the underlying issues. Children are engaged in various anti-child marriage activities such as theatre for development (which includes drama, debates, street theatre etc). These shows are greatly enjoyed by community members and strong messages that are sent out through such shows by this attractive, attention-grabbing media make people more receptive to the commitment of saying no to early marriage.

Birth registration has also gone a long way towards reducing child marriages as the documentation of the infant's birth date (along with other details such as names, parents' names, address, etc) prevent parents from falsely increasing the girl's age and comply with the law. The situation has been ameliorated further by the introduction of online birth registration which prevents parents from manipulating data during marriage. More girls undergo birth registration than boys and hence the incidence of child marriages among females is gradually decreasing.

Technical assistance of similar organizations working on the same agenda within an area facilitates UPs to formulate an action plan as well as allocate budget for training such as life skill training for children. Through awareness raising events, training and progress review meetings, they are sending consistent messages to the community to change their way of thinking and decision making. Such alliances have further gone on to strengthen their programme by working

with government bodies at district levels and many have or are about to join national forums for policy advocacy in order to amend the current law. Plan International Bangladesh for example has started sharing its experiences at the national level with other NGOs and this has received positive response from NGOs. However, the government must play an active role in order to stop child marriages. Plan has created a system of facilitation that involves community members, government and non-government authorities. Plan expects that the system will exist through modified law and implementation detail including active participation and responses from government, NGOs and mass people. The human and financial support will then be provided from government funds and NGOs will provide complementary supports in this regard.

*“More and more parents are now saying no to child marriages and many have decided to wait till their daughters turn eighteen. Children themselves also understand the problems of early marriages and are now confident enough to stand up against any proposal for an early marriage.”*

Much of this can be credited to the presence of life skill training for children. Such training has made them more aware, more assertive in the face of obstacles like an early marriage, built and increased group



solidarity. In many instances, they have communicated with the police and have successfully stopped marriages with the help of child protection groups, UP executive officers and government bodies. Children have agreed to the maintenance of a separate register in police stations to register child marriage cases for investigation and taking necessary legal action. Upazila administration has also invited UPs to take strong initiatives such as holding meetings, making action plans, attending awareness events and making reports to the police. Communication channels are much smoother after the distribution of leaflets with necessary contact information in case of emergency, which only encourages communication between different bodies. Through the actions of child protection groups, government and non-government bodies have gradually learned to respond adequately to such situations. Child

protection members hold awareness raising events, regular meetings, etc regarding child marriage and other cases of violation against children. Any incidence of a child marriage is immediately brought to the attention of the group by members. This information is relayed to government authorities while they continue to maintain close observation around the case. Along with the local government authorities, they turn to Upazila Executive Officer in order to stop the particular marriage from proceeding further. Two alliance members are playing an active role to stop child marriages while UP body members have gradually started to assume a more firm and active position towards stopping child marriages. Alliance members have been adequately trained to combat these issues with training in policy advocacy, related knowledge, tools, techniques, campaign design etc. This has reduced the trend of marriages among young women.



Marriage is still viewed as a provision of social security for the female child and this deeply-ingrained psyche has yet to change radically. Factors such as prestige, poverty and fear of any abuse often cause them to hasten marriages. Even with the success of the campaign, many child marriages, which take place at midnight are not addressed. Changing the mindset and large coverage intervention can prevent such cases. Another challenge is the failure to complete secondary schooling by female children. At that age, parents often discourage children from going to school because of higher costs associated with education, because of sexual harassment on the way to school and because of her demand in the marriage market (which peaks at adolescence) and hence her necessary preparation for marriage (which goes on to nullify the importance of further schooling). Parents also manipulate the age of their underage daughters during marriage through age amendment by the notary public or by changing the birth date on the birth registration certificate. This can be prevented by strengthening the birth registration system so that the actual age of the child will be known. Auto-monitoring system has still not taken significant strides in stopping child marriages in practice. The problem is further complicated because children themselves do not know about the consequences of early marriages. Many fall in love and run off to get married outside Plan International Bangladesh working areas. Mobile phone facilities and unrestricted internet services propel children to engage in pre-marital affairs and early marriages. Once married, parents have no option other than to accept them. Plan is rigorously working to change the way of thinking of the young by engaging them in child marriage awareness programmes. Child marriages are often not stopped because of

lack of involvement by the law enforcement authorities such as the police. The police are unable to deal with cases which are not reported and they also have very little interest to deal with these cases. Moreover, the general unfriendliness of the police force prevents people from turning to them for help, thus worsening the situation.

*Females must complete secondary schooling for their empowerment, emancipation and future economic security. They will be able to stand up to existent socio-cultural norms and force marriages. There is a positive correlation between education level and entry into the marriage market for an adolescent child; higher the level of education received, less the likelihood of her being married too early.*

Building relationship and persuade local law enforcing agencies to ensure implementation of child marriage act is to be considered both by the government and civil society (especially alliances, networks) that will ensure towards reducing child marriage dramatically.

UP bodies should be sensitized on the issues so that they can assist the law enforcement

agencies in this regard. Regular advocacy workshops should be organized for the key persons in the society to discuss about consequences of child marriage and its prevention. There should be a community based strong reporting system developed to obtain information on possibility of any event of child marriage in the locality, so that the local leaders and key persons can take measures on time to counsel the parents, discuss about the legal implications of child marriage and to convince them to postpone child marriage.

*Religious leaders play a key role in influencing early marriages because of their influence with parents and marriage registrars. They are influenced by parents to falsify the age of young brides during marriage registration. So, it is necessary to work closely with them for greater co-operation and greater influence on people's decisions.*

Sensitizing the public to report cases of child marriages will enable the police to take legal action against perpetrators, thereby increasing their effectiveness in maintaining the law. Often times, many cases go unreported to the police. This can be done only if the people are aware. Respective authorities should monitor marriage registration and supporting documents for

the fullest effect. A protective environment for children needs to be created and sustained through the child protection mechanism (which involves working with civil society organizations to create safe spaces, forums and support networks for children to receive information and life skill training). The family also needs to be counseled to influence their decision making. Relatives also need to be counseled as they indirectly influence decision making within the family. The community should be mobilized to prevent child marriages and this can be done by working with different male, female and adolescent groups and sending the right messages to them. The media should also be utilized to reach the public with appropriate Behavioral Change Communication (BCC) materials by the government, NGOs and civil society.

Plan collaborated at national level, analyzing the gaps in legal and social structure, through a national workshop which initially worked as a contributing factor for policy advocacy and for lobbying with policy makers (parliament members, government high officials) on child marriage issue. Plan also contributed to implement a successful online birth registration which is being used successfully for stopping child marriage. Plan expects to move this initiative forward.

Footnote \*\* Plan International Bangladesh Commissioned A National Survey On Child Marriage In Bangladesh In 2012. Icddr,b Carried Out The Research And The Report Titled "Child Marriage In Bangladesh: Findings From A National Survey 2013" Was Launched In September 2013



Customary Laws, Norms and Practices in  
Bangladesh Perspective:

# Gender Based Violence

MD. TAJUL ISLAM & MD. ROKON UDDIN





Gender Based Violence (GBV) stems from the subordinate position women are placed in society in terms of economic, social and political power which encourages their abuse. In Bangladesh, norms, tradition and practices overshadow the legal system which has provisions in place to address GBV by making it a punishable offence. 53% of women in Bangladesh have reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence in the last 12 months. This rate is even higher in rural areas; 53% of urban women compared to 62% of rural women experienced physical and/or sexual violence. These are clearly alarming figures.

A study was undertaken in 2013 to identify the existing customary laws, norms and practices on GBV and gender based discrimination in Bangladesh on account of community, geography, society, religion and culture; to analyze the interrelationship and influence of these existing customary laws, norms and practices; and to analyze the gaps and conflicts of the customary laws, norms and practices with the national and international laws and policy standards.

The study took a three-dimensional view for a more comprehensive and complete set of findings by finding out about GBV from the victims (the individual or the woman), from people she has personal relationships with (parents, husbands, relatives) and from community members (the society) as all three parties' perceptions and attitudes influence GBV. The study areas were selected from the working area of the Girl Power Project (GPP) of Plan International Bangladesh with funding from Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under MFS-II. The project is being implemented in 30 Upazillas (sub-districts) and 10 zones of eight Districts from 2011. The study area was divided into six clusters, namely, Nilphamari, Rajshahi,

Gazipur, Kishoregonj, Shariatpur and Dhaka, based on the proximity of districts. The primary data of the study was collected using qualitative tools and techniques including in-depth interview (IDI), key informant interview (KII), focus group discussion (FGD), case studies and observation techniques. The study focused on issues regarding girls and women of 10 – 24 years. A total of 177 respondents were used as the source of primary data. The study was conducted using local activists, local government representatives, Plan & its partner staff, Child Protection Groups (CPG), Community Based Organization (CBO) members, national experts, local men and women, community members and young people. Selected case studies were conducted on child marriage, sexual harassment and rape victims.

The patriarchal structure of society has been

## KEY FINDINGS

so strongly ingrained in society, that people (including women) have been conditioned into perceiving gender based violence to be normal. Women themselves often cannot categorize GBV as violence because they consider it to be a part of their lives and somewhat acceptable.

The study reemphasized what is widely acknowledged: for a female in a patriarchal society, her period in life has two phases, spent with two families - one is with her parents and the other with her husband's family. In both these phases, she is subjected to abuse and sometimes even violence. In her parents' home, she is disciplined strictly (often with the use of force) to socialize her into accepting and performing the role expected of her in society. Since females are in a weaker position in terms of decision

making and having their rights acknowledged, families often become sources of physical assault, sexual violence, child marriage, forced marriage and confinement, some or all of which are practiced covertly. Any instance of gender based sexual violence is suppressed primarily to guard the female's chastity as it is considered a highly prized asset and a prime requirement for her marriage to a suitable groom, linked to her family's honour. This further encourages perpetrators to continue acts of GBV going unchecked as reporting is low due to fear of shame.

The study showed that within a family,

## ACCEPTABILITY OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

brothers abuse sisters to establish their authority over them, opinions of females are ignored, girls are confined in their rooms in case of love affairs with little communication with the outside world and they are married off too early because of the little financial value (and excessive financial burden), they represent to their respective families. Marriage is seen as a way of safeguarding a female's honour and of transferring the guardianship of the daughter from the parents to the husband. Turning down a marriage proposal is seen as disobedience and oftentimes the sign of a highly undesired covert lover affair, which can contribute to driving child marriage for girls under the age of 18. Dowries are also given by the bride's side. A financially solvent or migrant groom is highly valued and hence the dowry paid out to them is higher. In a conjugal relation, the husband is the one in control while the wife is the subordinate. The husband enjoys complete ownership of the wife and violence is seen as a means of control. Since the wife is reduced to the status of being a husband's

possession, society justifies many of the husband's actions against the wife. Thus, physical assault, marital rape, and trafficking are all issues that get a free ride in terms of society's favour. Moreover, the study showed that religious misunderstanding often causes women to believe that it is their sole duty to please their husbands and any instance of GBV is justified as they blame themselves for having failed to please their husbands. Thus, they perceive issues such as marital rape to be normal. It is tolerated to often quell a husband's suspicion of his wife's fidelity. Thus, manifestation of the husband's anger directed at her is perceived as normal and even right but certainly acceptable as an expression of his manhood. Any disobedience on her part is seen as sinful.

The study highlighted that physical assault occurs for a number of reasons such as failure to give dowries on time, disagreement with in-laws, or the wife supporting her own family without her husband's permission or knowledge. Such cases of torture are intensified when the husband is a regular substance abuser or a gambler. Much of this goes unreported because of the fear of humiliation in case the news gets around to the rest of the society. Moreover, such reporting of violence can go on to increase complications. It can increase acts of physical torture directed at the wife, lead to material deprivation, a second marriage by the husband (permissible in Bangladesh) or divorce. All such consequences of reporting are in cases more undesirable than cases of physical torture. Since a wife's identity in society is determined by her husband's identity, a divorced woman suffers from an identity crisis and has trouble supporting herself alone in an un-cooperative society which looks down on her for being divorced.



In cases of a second marriage, there is the perception that the wife has failed to please the husband. Thus, women do not report this for fear of further stigmatization. Such cases are greater in number where wives are completely financially dependent on their husbands.

## EARLY AND CHILD MARRIAGE

In the marriage market, the demand for very young females is the highest with the demand falling as the female's age rises. Thus, there is a pressure on women to get their daughters married off early often leading to child marriages. Fears about the case of love affairs and self-initiated marriages cause family members to marry off their female children as quickly as possible also. Self-initiated marriages (i.e. when a girl chooses to marry of her own accord) is firmly looked down upon and is seen as the result of media influence and easy availability of adult media. There is also a societal pressure on families to get their daughters married off early. If this is not done, daughters are often accused of having love affairs by outsiders. Other times, there is the unspoken competition between neighbours or on a larger scale between community members to get their daughters married off earlier, thereby demonstrating the daughters' desirability in the marriage market. These instances result in child and early marriages. In such cases, neighbours or relatives do not usually intervene (even if they perceive it to be wrong) because they do not want to stir up any disputes.

Parents engage in rights violations by marrying the daughter off too early, often by manipulating birth date in certificate or holding marriage areas in far-off regions to throw off the spotlight. The public often does not have the knowledge of legal violation to intervene. Or protesting against a child marriage can complicate relations between people. In the case of a political leader for example, it might mean the loss of votes in elections.

## RAPE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

A stark finding of the study is that stalking and sexual harassment by young males elevates their status in their friends' eyes and is often initiated due to peer pressure. The study found a shocking number of reports that rape victims are blackmailed with recorded videos of the attack and as a result bring in other females to the perpetrators to prevent her tapes from being circulated more widely, as wider knowledge of this would damage her family honour.

*In an incident of rape, family and community members often try to marry the victim off to the rapist in an attempt to restore honour.*

However, because the rapist is not penalized for his crime, he is encouraged to commit further acts of violence. In the case of violence within a marriage, the issue is considered to be a very private one and hence outsiders do not step in to intervene. It is even seen as typical phenomenon if it is the husband who abuses the wife; it is expected and even normal.

## THE PRACTICE OF DOWRY – A CONTRIBUTOR TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILD MARRIAGE

From the bride's side, the act of giving dowry is justified by parents as it looks very unsocial to see the groom and his party leaves with no "gift". Moreover, many believe that a system of dowry is a compensation for any lack of qualities a female has to have to be the ideal wife; the higher the deficiency the greater the dowry needs to be to compensate for that. Parents also see it as a way of lending a helpful hand to the successful commencement of the daughter's marital life so that she does not lack anything in the in-laws' house. Brides justify the offering of dowry as a substitute for her family's wealth which she might or might not inherit in the future. Thus, dowry is a certain guarantee that a daughter has been provided for adequately by her parents before leaving the house.

From the bridegroom's side, the receipt of dowry is justified because a high dowry increases social prestige and also is a gift the bride's family should pay as a way of showing gratitude for supporting their daughter. Dowry becomes the yardstick the value of the bride is measured against that brought by other wives in the family and hence affects how she is treated in the family. Failure to bring high dowries often means verbal and physical abuse.

*Society also creates the pressure to give dowries.*

Matchmakers also profit in this case by taking a certain commission out of the total dowry given to the groom and hence they encourage the dowry system to flourish as well.

## ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Issues of violence are dealt with at a local level through salish,\*\* and community elites but the study showed that ultimately, all of them fail to deliver justice as such parties are easily bribed to give biased, unjust verdicts on behalf of the perpetrators' favour. Other than gender discrimination in such local trials, the key factor is social and economic power. Often times, the perpetrator has the economic and social power to have salishs go his way. The exclusion of women in public forums means that they have no voices in such salishs.

There needs to be legal and policy reforms in this regard. A particular department such as Department of Women Affairs or Department of Social Welfare can be assigned to deal with issues such as child marriages, dowries etc. by monitoring the traditional practices associated with them. The department can then sanction severe punishment to offenders. Existing laws need to be amended and new laws need to be enacted. Discriminatory laws such as unequal right to inheritance, unequal right to marital property, unequal right to divorce etc. need to be abolished or amended to be gender-neutral. New laws in compliance with the High Court Directives on sexual harassment need to be enacted and the Rule should be published for the effective implementation of Domestic Violence (Protection and Prevention) Act.





Modern medical evidence collection methods need to be introduced for sexual offences. A separate prosecution system and a separate prosecution team for such cases should be established in the high court. The government also needs to help by allocating its budget for the creation of programmes that prevent GBV as well as protect women from becoming GBV victims. Moreover, it needs to establish shelters for victims of GBV. Private and public partnerships can also develop for the allocation of resources for GBV prevention and rehabilitation for victims. Advocacy should also be initiated and networking channels opened up with income generating organizations and corporate sectors for referral of GBV victims for economic help. Corporate Social Responsibility should also be a part of women empowerment programme.

Different stakeholders such as government institutions, local government institutions and support services need to be trained to respond adequately to GBV. For example, training regarding gender relations analysis, gender mainstreaming, child rights, GBV and human rights needs to be conducted among government officials and related professional groups. Capacity building programmes for local government need to be introduced so that it can resolve issues of GBV with punishment that complies with the law and human rights. Existing public services and programmes for women empowerment also needs to be monitored using public hearing, social audit, citizen's report and so on to ensure good governance among duty bearers. In order to address any case of GBV, there also needs to exist a good support system comprising of trained health workers, rehabilitation facilities and counseling centres.

However, the greatest success is possible if GBV can be stopped right where it often starts- within the public and private spheres of society. This can be done by transforming outdated socio-cultural norms. Firstly, the condescending attitude normally taken towards women needs to be addressed in order to eradicate cases of GBV. Campaigns need to run to raise awareness; educational and advocacy programmes should also be undertaken on High Court judgments that ban fatwa\*\*\*, (literally means legal opinion of Mufti but in Bangladesh 'fatwa' is used for imposing extra-judicial punishment issued through shalish usually by adopting different disgraceful and humiliating methods to punish women for so called anti-social or immoral activities )corporal punishment, sexual harassment, forceful Purdha practice and forced marriage at all levels to educate the public about the law and legal consequences of these acts of GBV. Such campaigns should also include sensitizing community elites, social elites and religious leaders about GBV and its consequences, therefore particularly targeting men and boys. These campaigns need to run deep enough to address the core causes of GBV which are exacerbated by strong patriarchal socio-cultural norms.

Shalish\*\* (Traditional, Informal Or Semi-formal Form Of Dispute Resolution)  
Fatwa\*\*\* (Literally Means Legal Opinion Of Mufti But In Bangladesh 'Fatwa' Is Used For Imposing Extra-judicial Punishment Issued Through Shalish Usually By Adopting Different Disgraceful And Humiliating Methods To Punish Women For So Called Anti-social Or Immoral Activities )





# ASRH vulnerabilities during and after disaster

HARIBONDHU SARMA AND KAZI ROBIUL ALOM



## CONTEXT

ADOLESCENTS, OFTEN DESCRIBED TO identify those between 10-19 years of age, account for one third of the total population in Bangladesh. They face a range of social, psychological, sexual & reproductive health related challenges. They have limited access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) related information as well as services. Female adolescents are in a worse situation than male adolescents. A recent study commissioned by Plan International Bangladesh and conducted by ICDDR,B showed that 64% of all women aged between 20-24 were married before their 18th birthday. The marriage rate of adolescent girls is eleven times higher than that of boys. It is also estimated that 28% of teenage girls are mothers and another 5% are pregnant with their first child. Sexual violence against women and girls is widespread, while substance abuse is emerging as another major factor behind the issues hampering adolescents.

The situation is a reflection of the deprivation of rights for adolescent girls and boys, particularly their sexual and reproductive health rights, and their facing gender inequality within the family, communities and wider society.

Disasters play a key role in further hampering this situation for adolescents. It is clear from experience that disasters make it even more inaccessible for adolescents to get Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) services. Almost everyone is more or less adversely affected. Children, women and elderly suffer the most. In contrary to popular belief, adolescents are also equally vulnerable if not more in a disaster situation. One major problem that adolescents, especially girl adolescents, face during and after disaster is lack of protection leading to high vulnerability to abuse and different forms of harass-

ment. The reasons are varied - a general lack of SRH awareness among adolescents, misleading SRH information and more particularly unavailability of adolescent-friendly health services (AFHS). In Barguna, one of the most vulnerable coastal districts of Bangladesh, these services are woefully inadequate. In this situation Plan International Bangladesh started implementing 'Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (ASRHR) in Disaster Prone Areas of Bangladesh' project in Barguna district with funding from SIDA. It is important for the project to identify the vulnerabilities of the adolescents in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and suggest preparatory strategies to reduce these vulnerabilities. In order to assess vulnerabilities that adolescent girls and boys are facing, Plan commissioned a study. The overall aim of the study was to identify ASRH vulnerabilities of adolescents during and after disaster.

The specific objectives were:

- **To identify the barriers to adolescents accessing comprehensive sexuality information/education and adolescent friendly health services during and after disaster.**
- **To identify availability and adolescents' access to contraceptives during and after disaster.**
- **To identify exposure to sexual harassment, violence and exploitation, trafficking, transactional sex, and child marriage during and after disaster.**
- **To identify the key stakeholders related to ASRH vulnerabilities during and after disaster.**
- **To define the role of the key stakeholders to reduce ASRHR vulnerabilities during and after disaster.**

The study was exploratory in nature and used cross-sectional data and information. Qualitative techniques such as interviews, FGDs and case studies were used involving adolescents, parents, teachers, community leaders, law enforcement agencies, relief workers and members of local disaster management committees. A total of 50 people were interviewed for the study. To identify the barriers to adolescents accessing comprehensive sexuality information/education and adolescent friendly health services (AFHS) during and after disaster, the study extensively used examples from Cyclone Sidr. During Sidr, houses and health care facilities (hospitals, pharmacies etc.) were destroyed and the communication system collapsed. Food, drinking water and proper sanitation facilities were scarce. Basic medical supplies were inadequate mainly because all suppliers were affected adversely by the disaster. Families took shelter in communal shelter camps, in other houses, dams and roads. After 4-5 days, health workers provided first aid services to the victims, which were inadequate. There were also no ASRH services at all.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Findings of the study showed that adolescents were confused about their identity during this difficult period. From social and cultural perspectives, adolescents are treated as children and adults simultaneously. Society expects that they should perform the roles of both adults and children, while denied the fun children have and freedom adults enjoy. They also become aware of the physical and mental changes happening to them but do not know how to manage that change. Adolescence is the crucial period in a person's life where the individual's personality is built up; it is a period of growth and

development (new capacities and enhancement of personal resources). Each adolescent comes at this stage of maturation and it is natural to experience a degree of disorganization and confusion during this period. As far as disaster is concerned, adolescents reported a range of problems that they had to face during and after disaster.

*Girl adolescents had more problems especially at the time of menstruation as sanitary napkins or clean cloth was not available. Even though some organisations provided sanitary pad in their disaster response pack to help adolescent girls most of them could not use them as they did not know how to use them.*

Even when there were health services available many of the adolescent girls could not avail them because they were too shy to communicate with the service providers who were often males.

There were other barriers too, as the study revealed. In most of the cyclone shelters there was no provision of separate spaces or toilets for adolescents and they had to share rooms with others. All these led them to face various types of abuse, including sexual abuse. All of these factors heightened the vulnerabilities faced by adolescent girls, more than boys.



*However, male adolescents also had their fair share of problems. They had little knowledge about their pubertal changes, something they could not share with their parents. The relationship between parents and their adolescent boys does not allow for such sharing in Bangladeshi culture. Besides, the parents of the studied population also had limited information and in many cases had misconception about ASRH issues.*

The traditional social attitude posed obstacles because adolescents, boys or girls, taking ASRH services, is not seen to be something healthy by society. Rather the chances of being stigmatized are very high for those who would dare to avail such services.

Moreover, in regards to contraceptives, supply of contraceptives was closely linked with access. Sources of contraceptives were identified as public health service facilities such as the Union Health & Family Welfare Center (UHFWC) at union level, Non Government Organisation (NGO) clinic at upazilla level, local pharmacies and grocery shops at community level. However, marital status was an important factor to avail rights to contraceptive in terms of both

information and services. Only married adolescents have access to contraceptives; unmarried adolescents, boys or girls, do not. Popular belief is that premarital sex would be high if contraceptives were available for unmarried adolescents which hinders their access.

More significantly, in a disaster situation, availability and access to contraceptives is the last priority in comparison to first-aid and more basic health services. The consequences often include an increasing number of unwanted pregnancies among the married adolescents.

A World Bank (2008) assessment report on Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh emphasised the point that all adolescents are entitled to the rights of a child. They have the right to the highest level of health care services including information and the services related to sexual reproductive health rights irrespective of their marital status. Even though some contraceptives were supplied a few days after Sidr, adolescents had little information for making informed choices from a variety of contraceptives, such how to use them, the relative advantages and disadvantages of different contraceptives and so on. Again, experience of harassment was very frequent among the adolescent boys and girls, especially among adolescent girls in the study areas. These harassments were happening everywhere – where they lived (in the family), where they moved (in the community), where they worked/studied (in society). Considering the types, nature, means, context, perpetrator and victims of harassment, there were four types of harassment reported by the respondents in the study area: mental, physical, sexual and social harassment. During disaster the risks of harassment were greater for adolescent girls than it was for boys due to

socio-cultural construction of sexuality and gender role. Some adolescent girls shared their experiences of harassment during the time they spent at shelter camps. Uses of various slang and vulgar words by ‘bad’ people were common. Some girls reported abuse. Groping was very common. Incidents were more frequent during nights when there was no light and female adolescents had to go to the toilet. Another instance where they were subjected to sexual harassment was during the period in which they had to stand in long queues for long periods of time during the collection of relief items. Sometimes adolescent girls were pressurized to provide sexual favours to powerful individuals of the community in exchange for the relief packages or financial help/infrastructure-related assistance. In some cases even their parents did not protect their adolescent girls from being abused because sexual abuse of their daughters ensured relief for the family. Girls also became victims of sexual abuse when they worked alongside men during reconstruction such as pond digging and reconstruction of school building.

Another critical finding was the increasing rates of child marriage during and after Sidr, highlighting the sense of insecurity of parents for their child or adolescent girls. Again marriage is often viewed as the best means of protecting a girl’s chastity which parents are extremely anxious to protect. The local influential elite and the rich were found to be particularly interested in marrying young adolescents during and after a disaster, exploiting the vulnerable situations of the adolescents and their families.

As shared, stakeholders for adolescents are found at three levels: at family level, at service delivery level and at community

level. Parents, grandparents, sisters in law, siblings, uncles, and aunts were identified as potential stakeholders at family level. The roles expected from this group involved talking freely with the adolescents and taking issues of adolescents more seriously. However, lack of information added with taboos and misconception created strong barriers between adolescents and adults. At the service delivery level, adolescent facilitators and counselors of NGOs, Family Welfare Visitor (FWV) and Sub Assistant Medical Community Officer (SACMO) at the government level were found to be important stakeholders and adolescents appreciated the mechanism by which the service providers were ensuring ASRH support to them. However, it must be noted that the study found these services were inadequate and often not timely.

Adolescents also reported that they acquired knowledge through different campaigns such as Theatre for Development (TfD) and courtyard meetings and that if required they could seek help from NGO-supported adolescent counselors for their psychological & physical help.

As for stakeholders at community level, the study reinforced that community leaders, teachers, religious leaders, law enforcing personnel, pharmacists, relief workers and other influential people were important actors for the rights of adolescents. Community leaders were identified as one of the key stakeholders as they play an important role in accessing SRH information by adolescents and to deal with problems of harassment. Teachers were identified as critical stakeholders because some SRH issues are included in the textbook of the secondary school curriculum.





But in most cases teachers were found reluctant to talk about these issues in the classroom. As far as during disasters is concerned, relief workers, both at GO and NGO levels, were identified as very important stakeholders because of their direct involvement and their position of power during and after disaster.

All levels of stakeholders still held traditional societal norms and views about SRH rights. Some of them found it 'negative' and 'unethical' to provide unmarried adolescents access to SRH commodities. The stakeholders at service delivery level, however, were found motivated towards adolescents' SRH rights, but they clearly did not have the influence required to change deep-rooted social taboos as SRH in Bangladesh. Greater commitment on the part of the stakeholders at all three levels was highlighted as a major

need if increased impact is to be achieved. Overall, the study findings revealed that during disasters the SRH of adolescents in the study area were vulnerable in terms of ambiguous perceptions among adolescents and the community on sexual and reproductive health; barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health related information and services; inadequate awareness about adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights in the community; severe magnitude of harassment; and geo-ecological settings (e.g. coastal setting) of the community. The adolescents in the study area are facing dual vulnerability – from natural disasters and traditional social attitude to girls and women in general. Due to such dual pressure the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents in the study area are at risk of losing all the rights related to SRH. Multi-pronged actions are thus called for to protect adolescent girls in this regard.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY FINDINGS

- The adolescents' SRH service should be incorporated in the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) of disasters at all levels.

- All disaster related efforts should be planned in such a manner where adolescents have easy access to services related to SRH. The service providers should receive adequate training for providing adolescent friendly services and should be supported to develop the necessary skills for counseling adolescents.

- Adolescents' in disaster should be a separate chapter in the Adolescent Reproductive Health strategy, highlighting the problems adolescents face in such conditions and what needs to be done to overcome these obstacles.

- Special emphasis should be given to orient relief workers of both government and NGOs in disaster preparedness programmes. Their orientation should include SRHR and adolescents' vulnerabilities in disaster prone areas and how to address those vulnerabilities.

- ASRH programmes should involve parents, health workers, community members, leaders, government, local level authorities and other relevant NGO workers to make all relevant bodies aware about the rights of adolescents in relation to disaster.

- Peer parents should be developed with the participation of both male and female parents. These parents should be supported to receive a minimum orienta-

tion in terms of adolescents' rights and gender equality.

- Traditional beliefs and cultural norms about adolescents' sexuality and SRH should be taken into consideration before SRH programmes are introduced. The local context and perceptions related to cyclone, the way of taking shelter, traditional survival mechanisms, and experiences of victims about violence of SRH rights during and after disaster need to be addressed through an adolescent-friendly lens in any programme.

- Adolescents' and community members' participation is necessary in any programme development, activity planning to enhance quality, ownership and sustainability.

This Is A Summary Of A Qualitative Assessment Study On "Adolescent Sexual And Reproductive Health (Asrh) Vulnerabilities During And After Disaster In Barguna Sadar Upazilla And Role Of Stakeholders To Reduce These Vulnerabilities." The Assessment Study Was Done By Plan International Bangladesh.



# Life beyond the Streets

*Plan recognizes that when girls are given the opportunity and adequate support, they have the power to turn their lives around, regardless of the difficult circumstances they may live in. As we believe in girls, we can help them to believe in themselves – and empower them with a new pathway. This is the story of Beauty (not her real name), who engaged with Plan's Drop-in-Centres for streetchildren run in the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh, in partnership with local NGO, PSTC.*

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My name is Beauty. I am 15. I have a brother and a sister. My father is Abu Taher and mother is Asia Begum and we are from Imanakandi village in Narayanganj .

My father moved to Dhaka along with my mother and brother in 1994 around 3 years before my birth and settled in a slum in Mohammadpur. My father got a job of fish selling and mother started to work as a domestic helper. My father married another woman and deserted my mother a few months before I was born. Since then my father never returned.

I was born in Dhaka. I heard from my mother that she was working in a milkman's house at that time. Before going for her work she would put me on my brother's lap in a verandah. She would work for the whole day and sometimes would come to breastfeed me. The milkman was very kind to us and would often send us milk.

When I was six, I would go out of the house, roam around in the streets, pick up potatoes, onions etc. at the agriculture market. Sometimes, I would beg for food from people when I was hungry. I would stay in the streets day in and day out, be it storm or rain. I would not change my rain soaked dress for hours on end because I did not even know that I should. Very often I would be sleeping on the streets. Sometimes people would take me inside promising rice, vegetables etc and then engage me in massaging their bodies and some would even venture into touching my private parts. I, however, had little clue of what was happening.

When I was 8 or 9, I would sometimes come across bhaiyas and apas (brothers and

sisters) who would ask us to visit a drop-in-centre (DIC), a kind of shelter home for children. They would talk about the opportunities and scope to learn reading and writing, get good food etc. But I did not want to leave my friends with whom I enjoyed the streets. When apa said I could bring my friends as well, I finally agreed.

It was an altogether different experience for me. I saw children studying, drawing pictures and some watching cartoon on television. When apa asked if we wanted to join them we readily agreed. Then we had our names and addresses registered.

I used to be untidy before coming here, so was my dress. I also had skin diseases due to staying unclean for days. But as I started to come to the DIC I began to change. I started attending the literary classes as well as singing and drawing sessions. We also had counseling sessions where apa would advice us on what to do and what not to do, the kinds of activity and people we should avoid, so that we could better protect ourselves. My interest in studies helped me get admitted into Chinu Mian Government Primary School in Mohammadpur in grade-1 in 2003, something I could never have imagined before. I started an altogether new life.

At the DIC I was soon appointed as a peer educator. I learned about child protection, life skills, child marriage, the roles and responsibilities of a peer educator and so on. I also learned about abuse, different forms of abuse, the consequences of abuse. I then trained under Plan's 'Stop Child Marriage' project and learnt what to do to prevent child marriage, whom to contact and other issues. I also received training on tailoring, block and boutique at the drop in centre and was awarded with a sewing machine. I then started earning money that I used for my

studies and also to support my family.

Life is so much different for me now. I can play the harmonium and sing. I know how to keep myself clean and protect myself from potential abusers. I can speak well and make my point understood. So much so that I also had the opportunity to take part in a workshop titled 'South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children' held in Kathmandu, Nepal, back in 2011. I spoke there about the plight of Bangladeshi children.

I also learned drawing and my painting was on display in an art exhibition organised by Population Services and Training Centre (PSTC), an NGO and partner of Plan, in June 2012. And two of my works were sold for Tk 12,000 (US \$ 154). I used the money to buy books, pay my coaching fees and deposited some in my own personal savings account which is a service available in the DIC. I also performed in a drama called "Day Dream" staged at the national museum auditorium in April.

Now I am studying in 9th grade in the commerce section of Noorjahan Memorial Girls High School. My position in the family and community has changed because I am studying and earning. A number of street children in my locality have joined the DIC when they saw me coming here. I also talk to others who haven't yet come and encourage them to join as well. I want to work in a bank after completion of my studies and also to become an artist. Now I have dreams which I know I can one day make reality.

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