

# 9 BANGLADESH: COMMUNITY PRESSURE GROUPS CHALLENGE AGE-OLD VIEWS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*Child marriage and the giving and receiving of dowries are major factors in the continuation of domestic violence in Bangladesh. Laws have been passed that criminalize both practices, but they are difficult to enforce, especially in rural areas where custom and tradition tend to govern social life. An advocacy project supported by UNFPA has worked from the grass roots to change the cultural beliefs and practices through which violence against women persists. A host of community groups, made up of civic and political leaders, imams, village elders, schoolteachers, mothers-in-law, young people and others are challenging age-old practices, and proving that culture is anything but static.*

## THE CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

Bangladesh is relatively small in size (144,000 square kilometres, an area about half the size of Italy), but large in population (131 million). The country is predominantly agricultural, with the majority of the population living in rural areas and dependent on subsistence farming. More than half the rural population and over a third of those residing in cities and towns live in absolute poverty, on less than \$1 a day.<sup>2</sup> Politically, Bangladesh has been a parliamentary democracy since 1990.

Contraceptive use has risen steadily in Bangladesh—from about 8 per cent in 1975 to 58 per cent in 2004. During that same period, the fertility rate was cut in half, to an average of three children per woman in 2004. Infant mortality also dropped, from 153 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1975 to 65 in 2004. Life expectancy is 61 years for both males and females, according to a 2005 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey.

Since 1986, maternal mortality has been reduced by 50 per cent, and stands at about 320 deaths per 100,000 live births. Still, mortality related to pregnancy and childbirth accounts for more than a quarter of the deaths of women of reproductive age.

An unfavourable sex ratio persisting over time (Bangladesh is one of seven countries in the world where the number of men exceeds the number of

women) indicates continuing discrimination against women. The female disadvantage in child mortality remains unchanged, while the female-male gap in acute malnutrition has increased. Women continue to lag far behind men in literacy, though tremendous gains have been made over the last four decades. Women's participation in the labour force has also increased, however the majority of women are self-employed or working in the informal sector. Women receive lower wages for all kinds of labour, and the average income of women-headed households is 70 per cent that of households headed by men.

## BANGLADESH AND CEDAW

Bangladesh is committed to gender equality and women's empowerment and has taken initiatives in this regard. The Government has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, and the Beijing Platform for Action and has adopted proactive policies and programmes for women's advancement.

Nevertheless, custom and tradition continue to create obstacles to women's empowerment, and violence against women—mainly the abuse of women and girls in the family because of child marriage and the practice of dowries<sup>3</sup>—remains a problem. Various surveys have found that 50 per cent of female spouses experience

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, statistics in this section are drawn from the 'Statistical Profile of Women in Bangladesh', published jointly by the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Government of Bangladesh, December 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh. October 2005. 'Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction'.

<sup>3</sup> A study in Bangladesh showed that marriages involving dowry and other demands from the husband's side are a risk factor for physical violence. Women in these marriages are 1.8 times more likely to be physically assaulted by their husbands than women from whom a dowry is not expected.

physical abuse at the hands of their husbands, and 14 per cent of deaths during pregnancy are reported as resulting from injury or violence.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of equality is embedded in the Constitution of Bangladesh. But despite civil and criminal laws that protect women, patriarchal interpretations of the laws predominate. Discrimination persists because of cultural attitudes that discourage the lodging of complaints, on the one hand, and the fact that the laws are not enforced, on the other.

Discrimination against women in marriage, divorce and inheritance is another culture-bound issue that is reinforced by custom and tradition. As a result, Bangladesh failed to ratify Articles 2 and 16.1(c) of CEDAW that maintain that women and men should have the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and its dissolution. The Government recognizes the need for reforms in this area, but stresses that reforms need to be socially accepted before they can be officially sanctioned. Awareness-raising programmes on equal rights for women are therefore being implemented, with assistance from women's organizations, NGOs and other civil society groups, and international agencies such as UNFPA.

Though Bangladesh has ratified all CEDAW articles with the exception of these two, action to eliminate, amend or re-enact discriminatory laws is yet to be initiated. Moreover, the impact of the existing legal system and other public policies on gender is still not being monitored. Bangladesh presented its fifth periodic report to the CEDAW Committee in July 2004. Among the recommendations of the committee to Bangladesh were the following:

- Adopt a constitutional definition of discrimination that conforms with Article 1 of CEDAW
- Reform all laws in conformity with CEDAW
- Introduce legislation to criminalize domestic violence
- Provide legal protection from *fatwa* that instigate violence
- Introduce comprehensive strategies to combat trafficking
- Introduce a uniform family code for different communities
- Introduce gender-sensitive training for public officials, including law enforcement, judiciary and health services personnel
- Formulate a gender-sensitive policy for migrant workers

- Introduce temporary measures to encourage women's political participation and representation in parliament.

## THE UNFPA COUNTRY PROGRAMME

The Sixth UNFPA Country Programme for Bangladesh covered the years 2003-2005 and had a budget of \$18 million. Its goals were to improve the situation of women and the family by addressing reproductive rights and gender-based violence. The programme sought to:

- increase use of quality reproductive health services
- promote gender equity and equality through male participation, reduce gender-based violence and increase the number of women decision makers in politics and civil administration
- instil positive behaviour changes among youth and men in the area of sexual and reproductive health
- increase national capacity in reproductive health and population policies and programmes, in line with the ICPD Programme of Action.

These goals were pursued through programmes in reproductive health, population and development strategies, and advocacy.

The advocacy programme supported a government strategy that seeks to effect positive change on the attitudes and behaviour of people regarding their health. More than a dozen projects are being implemented to:

- Involve parliamentarians in population and development issues and religious leaders in human resources development
- improve advocacy on reproductive health and gender issues through mass communication and rural cooperatives
- Improve the welfare of garment worker and tea plantation families through reproductive health education and services
- Promote reproductive health education among adolescents through peer groups and youth clubs
- Introduce family life education through the non-formal education programme
- End gender-based violence through advocacy—the subject explored in this case study.

The training that was undertaken through the advocacy programme is extensive. For example, more than 28,000 religious leaders have been trained in reproductive

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Bangladesh. October 2001. Bangladesh National Strategy for Maternal Health.

rights and health, gender issues and HIV/AIDS, and are serving as advocates on these issues in their communities. Parliamentarians and other elected officials, along with opinion leaders, including journalists, have also been sensitized to these issues.

## THE PROJECT

'Advocacy to End Gender-based Violence through the MoWCA' was implemented by the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs, through its Department of Women's Affairs. The project became operational in April 2003 and was completed in December 2005. It had a budget of \$600,000, of which \$400,000 came from multilateral and bilateral sources.

The project carried out advocacy and awareness-raising activities to end violence against women and bring about positive change at the family and community level. Policy and decision makers at the highest levels of government were also targeted. Such changes were expected to create a more supportive environment for improvements in the health of women and the realization of their rights. For example, discouraging early marriage can help postpone pregnancy during adolescence, which can have detrimental effects on the survival, health and nutrition of the child and the young mother. Eliminating the practice of dowry can remove a prime cause of physical and mental abuse of women.

The project was carried out in 12 *upazila*, or subdistricts, throughout the country,<sup>5</sup> reaching an estimated 2.4 million people. Activities included:

- Research on the construction of gender roles, especially as they relate to violence against women
- Sensitizing husbands and in-laws on the adverse physical, mental and social consequences of violence against women
- Empowering women in decision-making roles within the family
- Creating pressure groups in the community to advocate against domestic violence
- Changing the attitudes of service providers to ensure that battered women receive equitable treatment
- Bringing about policy changes that will help enforce existing laws related to violence against women through advocacy directed to policy makers (elected leaders/parliamentarians, senior bureaucrats, other opinion leaders)

- Disseminating research results and other information at multiple levels.

## RESULTS

### Mobilization of the Community

In Bangladeshi society generally, only physical assault that causes bodily harm is considered a crime. Domestic violence is widely regarded as a private affair and is therefore largely invisible. In Paba *upazila*, however, where this case study was researched, people have come to understand violence against women from a broader perspective (including psychological abuse), and it is now recognized as a punishable offence.

In Paba *upazila*, the project succeeded in bringing together men and women from all walks of life to discuss the issue of violence against women and to find solutions to the problem. Attendance was impressive in spite of heavy daily workloads.

People in Paba are now well-versed in the laws against child marriage, dowry and domestic violence. They also know that survivors, whether women or girls, can receive legal support by contacting members of the Union Council (the lowest elected unit of the local government body), schoolteachers, the *upazila* women's affairs officer and even the *upazila nirbahi* officer (the administrative head of the *upazila*). Many, however, report that the need for legal action no longer arises since community pressure appears successful in preventing and settling violence-related issues.

The head of the *upazila* says that people now think twice before engaging in violent behaviour in the family for fear of community opposition. He and other officials say that the incidence of violence has declined, including psychological oppression by mothers-in-law. This is especially noteworthy since Paba was selected as one of the project sites because it had the highest incidence of violence against women in the Rajshahi district.

### Changed Attitudes about Child Marriage

As a result of the project, both men and women in Paba *upazila* are now aware of the legal age of marriage (21 for men and 18 for women) and the health hazards that can result when girls are married off at too young an age.

Moreover, the judges that register Muslim marriages, known as *kuzat*, have become more circumspect in their behaviour. By law, *kuzat* cannot register a marriage if the

<sup>5</sup> For administrative purposes, Bangladesh is divided into six geographical divisions—Dhaka, Chittagong, Barisal, Rajshahi, Khulna and Sylhet—representing 64 districts and 500 subdistricts, or *upazila*. An *upazila* is made up of 8 to 10 unions.

bride or groom is underage. However, in the past, birthdates were frequently falsified at the parents' request. Today, *kuzat* are afraid to falsify documents, fearing that the community will challenge them, and that they could be prosecuted for violation of the Child Marriage Restraint Act.

Teachers are also becoming powerful agents of change, not only among children but in influencing the attitudes of parents and guardians. One schoolteacher described two cases in which female students came to him complaining that their fathers were negotiating their marriage. He immediately counselled the fathers and warned them that if they went ahead with their plans he would inform local leaders and legal action might ensue.

### Changed Attitudes about the Practice of Dowry

Ironically, women in Bangladesh are major perpetrators of violence towards other women. The oppression they experience as wives and daughters-in-law is often internalized, and is typically expressed in aggressive behaviour towards their own son's wife. Such behaviour is exacerbated by the exchange of dowry.

Because it is an ingrained part of the local economy and culture, the practice of dowry is difficult to eradicate.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the project has successfully mobilized the community to reject it. The people of Paba *upazila* are now fully aware that, under the Dowry Prevention Act, the practice is a criminal offence, and that legal assistance is available to survivors of dowry-related abuse through various NGO and civil society organizations. Cruelty to wives to extract a dowry from their families is now rare because it is clearly understood that the community is against it. The people of Paba also know that the perpetrators of violence may no longer be able to escape punishment because local government bodies, such as the local village council, are all opposed to the practice.

Local government officials as well as teachers and imams all report that, today, no one in Paba *upazila* publicly receives or gives dowry and no bridal party dares to refuse to consecrate a marriage for non-fulfilment of dowry demands. The practice of dowry that does occur takes place underground, and the bullying or forms of extortion that do get reported are not without consequences. The realization is growing that demanding a dowry may turn out to be costlier than rejecting the practice.

### Changed Attitudes about Domestic Violence

Dowries and child marriage—which leaves a young girl who is mentally and physically unprepared for marriage in a vulnerable situation—are the predominant causes of wife-beating and psychological torture. To the extent that these two practices are on the decline, the abuse of wives is also diminishing. However, physical and psychological torture of wives is also fuelled by the traditional domination of men and the relative powerlessness of women in decision-making.

### Enhanced Roles of Women in Decision-making

Through the same process of group mobilization and advocacy, women in Paba are gradually gaining the confidence to assert themselves. Many in the community now believe that solving family problems should be the responsibility of both husband and wife. The ultimate result is that women are gaining more recognition and a better position within the family. Paba's women's affairs officer considers it an important step in addressing gender-based violence. At the same time, she says, women are assuming greater visibility in the public arena. In the Community Support Group meeting, for example, women now occupy the front seats, where they have become active participants in the discussion.

### Growing Awareness about Reproductive Health

An immediate objective of the project was to create positive change in women's reproductive health. In separate meetings for women and men, discussions are taking place on the care of pregnant women. Knowledge is growing about the appropriate food during pregnancy, the necessity to avoid tension, physical injury or mental pressure, and the importance of rest and health care. One of the mothers-in-law admitted that she accepted traditional food restrictions during her pregnancy without knowing the reason why. But later, as she watched an instructional video and field workers explained the facts, she came to understand that foods such as beef and eggs are nutritious for women at all times and that food restrictions are superstition. The health-seeking behaviour of pregnant women has also changed for the better.

## IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES

### Advocacy

All these achievements came about through advocacy efforts targeted at particular members of the communi-

<sup>6</sup> The pressure on a bride's father to produce both material and financial gifts for the bridegroom and his parents is intense, and, in most cases, forces the bride's family to borrow money at high interest rates, or to sell whatever land they possess. The dowry system tends to increase greed among the bridegroom and his family. If the bride's family fails to meet their demands, the newly married woman can be subjected to abuse, including psychological violence, by her husband and in-laws.

ty, some of whom subsequently become advocates themselves. Most influential is the Union Community Support Group, which is composed of community 'gatekeepers'—those who wield the greatest influence and help shape the opinions of others. As such, they are a formidable social force.

Through the project, a variety of groups were formed, each with different responsibilities in terms of exerting peer pressure:

### **Union Community Support**

**Group.** This is a group of around 100 people representing community leaders and gatekeepers, including imams and other religious leaders, local government officials, schoolteachers, NGO representatives, village elders, social workers, madrassa (Koranic school) teachers and youth leaders. The group meets once every three months and discusses problems and issues that arise during advocacy activities. The members devise solutions with help from the *upazila* women's affairs officer.

**Young People's Group.** The young people's group consists of 8-10 persons, mostly youth, who have been selected and trained by union field workers.<sup>7</sup> The group's main purpose is to sensitize the younger generation, including eligible bachelors and newly married husbands, to issues surrounding violence against women through weekly chats and visits to village tea stalls and daily markets. When the group hears that a boy is going to marry a minor or is preparing to take dowry, they meet him and try to dissuade him with the help of a field worker or member of the union *parishad* (local government body).

### **Uthan baithak (gathering in the courtyard).**

Traditionally, women in Bangladesh, especially rural women, were not allowed to appear in public or go outside the home. Instead, during leisure times, women in adjacent households would gather in the courtyard and talk. The project has adapted this tradition, called '*uthan baithak*', and is using it to address issues surrounding violence against women. Women assemble in the courtyard, as usual, but the group includes a project volunteer, female schoolteachers, elected women members of local government institutions and health

workers. Moreover, issues such as child marriage, dowry, wife-beating and other forms of abuse, reproductive health, reproductive rights, care of pregnant women and newborns, and gender equality dominate the discussions. The advantage is that women are relatively free to talk in the congenial atmosphere of the homestead. Gatherings can be held frequently during leisure hours and, because they are a traditional pastime, their husbands find it hard to object. Such gatherings take place every fortnight. Relevant topics are brought up again and again so that doubts can be

allayed and a permanent impression created. When an issue involves men, they are invited to participate, and an exchange of opinions and feelings takes place with a view to sensitizing the men.

### **Advocacy among wives and mothers-in-law.**

There are some issues that Bangladeshi men and women do not feel comfortable talking about in a mixed-sex group. For this reason, another group was formed exclusively for wives and their mothers-in-law. Meetings of this group usually start with acrimony and accusations between the two women, each blaming the other for maltreatment. This initial

candor, in fact, often helps to clarify issues and creates an entry point for promoting a change in attitudes.

In the patrilineal system of Bangladesh, it is a long-standing tradition that daughters leave their parental home on their wedding day to accompany their husband. The father formally hands over his daughter to her new in-laws with the words: "I am handing over my daughter to you forever. From now on, she is your daughter. Kindly consider her as your daughter." When talking to women, field workers suggest to the mother-in-law that her son's wife could be her own daughter who has left home. Conversely, they try to make the daughter-in-law understand that her mother-in-law is like her own mother, and that, on occasion, she may admonish her as her own daughter. Field workers say that such counselling is producing results. In some cases, the approach is so effective that mothers-in-law are being used as role models and serving as advocates.

### **Advocacy among husbands and fathers-in-law.**

Husbands and fathers-in-law have also formed their

*"When group meetings were first organized, male elders discouraged women from taking part in the discussion. They shouted the women down to take back seats. As more and more meetings were held, the scenario changed. Women are now vocal in these meetings; some of them sit up front and argue forcefully, making their views felt."*

— Women's affairs officer in Paba upazila

<sup>7</sup> Union field workers are literally people who work in the field to motivate others and facilitate project implementation. They circulate decisions taken in various meetings among people at large, and bring any problems reported to them or that they come across to the attention of project personnel. If possible, they solve these problems through village leaders and public representatives.

own group in which day-to-day tensions and family problems are discussed and common issues identified. Based on these discussions, solutions and strategies for living peaceably within the family with mutual respect are suggested through a participatory process.

One issue that dominates these meetings is the abuse of wives by their husbands. The men attempt to defend themselves by saying that women sometimes become unreasonable and obstinate and that beating them is the only way to correct them. They also point out that wife-beating is an old custom, practised by their forefathers, so there must be some merit in it. Field workers then ask them if it is the wife who is always unreasonable and the husband who is always right. They falter in answering. They are asked if they have discussed with their wife, in a rational way, the problem they are having, or have ever listened to their wife if she has good cause. They are asked if the beating made her reasonable and dispensed with the need for beating in the future. Finally, field workers explain to the men that discussion and mutual respect can lead to a solution without violence, which causes tension in the family and destroys family peace. Moreover, they point out that wife-beating has an adverse effect on children, who either develop a negative attitude towards their father or learn to come to blows with others on flimsy grounds. Usually, the men's attitudes soften and they become defensive by saying that nobody ever told them that before. The *upazila* officer and the female members of the union *parishad* report that, as a result of these discussions, the incidence of wife-beating and other forms of abuse is on the decline.

**Advocacy among the village *shalish*.** *Shalish* is an ancient tradition for settling minor disputes among residents of the village/union without legal action. Village leaders sit in a group and hear the cases of the parties in the presence of all the villagers. Based on the evidence they obtain, they render a judgement, which becomes binding due to the support of all present. *Shalish* is traditionally pro-male with a definite bias against women. But that, too, is changing. Members of the *shalish* are also members of the Community Support Group, and have been sensitized to issues involving violence against women. Moreover, when a case involving wife abuse is heard by the *shalish*, a field worker is present to remind the group of the legal provisions regarding violence against women and government policies on the matter.

*"In village society, daughters-in-law are tortured by their mothers-in-law for dowry. In our union, such violence by mothers-in-law is now almost non-existent because we bring wives and mothers-in-law together and counsel them. Such an approach has worked very well."*

— A woman from Bargacha union

### **Observance of international and national 'days'.**

Through the project, women's issues have been promoted through the observance of various international days, such as Safe Motherhood Day, World Population Day and International Women's Day. On these occasions, meetings are arranged with both male and female participants in which the significance and value of the days are discussed. Through such advocacy, the community begins to understand women's problems from a global context, and strengthen their awareness of women's rights. Since rural people tend to value the opinion

of experts, an outside speaker is usually invited to the event. For example, on Safe Motherhood Day, doctors might speak on reproductive health and the care of pregnant mothers and newborn babies. In 2005, the Safe Motherhood Day discussion revolved around the role of men in making a family happy. As an incentive to participation, a prize was awarded to the family deemed happiest as a result of a father's efforts. On World Population Day, a rally was held and a video on the topic shown.

Experience suggests that visual aids are effective advocacy tools.

**Advocacy through folk music and theatre.** Folk music and theatre are vital sources of amusement and entertainment in Bangladesh, irrespective of the audience's age, sex or economic status. Through the project, the educational aspects of these folk traditions are also being exploited. Songs and dramas have been written by local poets, field workers and a female school-teacher on the themes of child marriage, dowry and wife abuse. Since elaborate staging is not required, a performance can be held in any open space on short notice.

### **Pre-design Stage**

A project is a joint collaboration between the Government of Bangladesh and UNFPA. UNFPA has its own mission, objectives and priorities. It assesses country needs within that framework and draws up a country programme accordingly. The Government also has its priorities, determined by the demand put forward by various ministries on the basis of needs assessments. When the two partners agree, the Government formulates a project on the basis of the agreement.

In the case of this project, UNFPA formulated an advocacy programme on the basis of information available locally and globally. A 2002 survey conducted by

UNFPA ('Violence against Women in South Asia—a Regional Analysis') confirmed the high incidence of gender-based violence in Bangladesh. UNFPA subsequently undertook a study on male attitudes about violence against women, and found that it was generally acceptable among most Bangladeshi men. It concluded that men must be a key target group and that advocacy should be directed to both men and women.

For the Government's part, it has enacted numerous laws to eliminate violence against women. However, the laws were not enforced, and it became clear that the problem could be tackled most effectively at the grass roots, through advocacy and awareness-raising. Accordingly, the Government undertook a number of gender-training projects, including a Multisectoral Programme on Violence Against Women, also implemented by the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs.

An agreement was also reached with UNFPA to introduce a project aimed at attitudinal change through focused advocacy efforts.

The Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs was given the responsibility to formulate and implement the project. The Ministry's Department of Women's Affairs consulted various district and *upazila* officers about possible interventions and the strategies to be adopted. These officers, in turn, consulted relevant committees at those levels, in addition to local NGOs, elected representatives to local government and community members.

It was agreed that all government departments that were likely to play a role in advocacy would be involved in the project, including the Department of Mass Communication, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and the Ministry of Local Government. Women in Development Coordination Committees already functioning in all *upazila* provided support and coordinated the relevant organizations.

The operational procedures set out in the project document for achieving behaviour change were adjusted at the time of implementation. Rather than a preconceived set of activities, communities themselves were given the opportunity to decide what types of gatherings should be arranged, who should attend and what topics should be discussed, when and where meetings should be held, and what the role of various groups should be. As a result, the local population feel that the project is theirs and they are responsible for its success.

## MEDIATION AND NEGOTIATION

The project aimed to make a long-term contribution to improving women's status. However, this intention was

frequently misinterpreted. In some instances, community leaders saw the project as an attempt to break up families and encourage women to speak out against men. When this occurred, special efforts were made to consult with these leaders and garner their support.

The project design was as simple and straightforward as possible. However, once the project became operational, problems surfaced from various corners. Initially, it was not easy to recruit field workers from within the community. Potential candidates sensed that there would be strong resentment from their own families and the society at large in attempting to bring what were considered private matters into the public sphere. However, even prior to the recruitment of field workers, formal and informal leaders who were influential in the community had to be convinced that:

- Project activities will be implemented in consultation with them.
- Activities will, in no way, go against predominant religious values.
- The objective was to improve the relationship between wife and husband, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, and not to provoke disruption within the family unit.

## Gaining the Support of Community Gatekeepers

To garner the support of community gatekeepers, *upazila* and union leaders called a community meeting. When this happens, most rural people attend, since a good number of local institutions receive funds from the Government and feel obligated to participate. Fieldworkers also contacted people directly, explaining the purpose of the meeting; many came, simply out of curiosity. The key was to motivate them to stay on and participate in the intervention.

Discussions were held on issues relating to reproductive rights, dowry, early marriage and male involvement in these issues. The importance of addressing problems associated with women was discussed at length, as well as the impact such problems might have on children's health and on the family's socio-economic status. The first few meetings of the Community Support Group served to sensitize members to the issue of violence against women, enabling them to carry out advocacy efforts with the population at large. Members were encouraged to raise questions and issues, voice opinions and express counterinterviews. They also spoke about issues through their own experience and knowledge. Experts such as doctors and paramedics were called in as needed to explain technical points. Legal aspects were also discussed.

Through these meetings, the group came to understand the legal provisions against violence, dowry and child marriage, along with their harmful consequences. The benefits that come from transforming a culture that tolerates such violence were also discussed. To catalyse discussion, newspaper articles were distributed on adolescent deaths during childbirth and legal actions, including death sentences, resulting from violence emanating from the practice of dowry.

In the beginning, religious leaders were reluctant to support the project. Today, they are vocal advocates in ending violence against women in Paba upazila. Imams speak out against violence during Friday prayers and quote passages from the Holy Koran and Hadith that promote the rights of women. Teachers advise their students about the dangers of child marriage and dowry. And young people have become motivated to eliminate violence against women. The chairmen and members of the Union Council and Gram Sarkar<sup>8</sup> are vigilant on the issue of domestic violence and make people aware of their position through informal meetings.

### Gaining the Support of Religious Leaders

In societies with a high level of illiteracy, religious leaders tend to be particularly influential. In this project, the role of local religious leaders was reinforced by maximizing their function in negotiating family feuds. The strategy used to ensure their participation was to first gain the support of higher-ranking religious leaders.

Though the imams at first refused to participate in the project, the women's affairs officer persuaded them, through the offices of the Union Council, to meet with her. This is how she describes the meeting: "They came to meet me, but would not look at me and would not give me their attention. They started asking questions defiantly. I patiently answered their queries and explained to them the consequences of domestic violence. I assured them that the project is not against anybody or any institution; we are only concerned with everyone's well-being and seek the cooperation of all to ensure the good of the people,

including women. Ultimately they agreed to come to the forum meeting. Now they speak out against violence in their speeches before the *khutba* (sermon) in the Friday congregation."

### PARTNERS

Partners in the project included the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Mass Communication, Ministry of Religious Affairs, local NGOs, local journalists, opinion and religious leaders, youth groups and teachers.

### LESSONS LEARNED

**Culture is dynamic.** Violations of women's rights are often sanctioned under the cover of local cultural practices and norms, or by religions tenets that have been misinterpreted. People inherit the customs and traditions by which they live and rarely think to question them. Moreover, when a violation takes place within the home, the abuse is effectively condoned by the tacit silence and passivity of the community and law-enforcement machinery.

The project has demonstrated that even though people may appear traditional, they are often willing to

change, especially if that change will improve their lives. The process through which this occurs, however, is usually complex, requiring patience, understanding and sustained effort.

### Understanding the context in which you are working is a critical first step.

Understanding the traditions, values and beliefs of a society is a prerequisite to initiating change. For example, though the Community Support Group consists of both men and women, the tradition of segregating the sexes was acknowledged and used to the project's advantage. Through the creation of all-female and all-male groups, sensitive topics could be introduced that would be inappropriate in a mixed-sex gathering. Similarly, in an Islamic society, it was imperative to gain the support of imams in promoting the project's goals. Support groups and field workers used religious precepts to raise awareness in the community and prompt changes in attitudes and behaviour.

*"People adhere to age-old customs because they are unaware of the negative side-effects of their beliefs. When facts regarding the negative impact of customs are revealed to them through concrete cases, they understand and show a willingness to discard such customs. Moreover they have faith in the opinion of experts. When a doctor tells them that pregnant women need good food and that child pregnancies are hazardous, they are inclined to trust them."*

— Women's affairs officer in Paba upazila

<sup>8</sup> An informal village council responsible for overall supervision and management of local law and order and social activities.

**Unless men are actively involved, violence against women cannot be effectively addressed.** According to a recent study by UNFPA,<sup>9</sup> 48 per cent of Bangladeshi men think that wife-beating is justifiable. Unfortunately, the majority of women in the country concur with that view. Since men in Bangladesh tend to dominate relationships, their meaningful involvement is required in changing these attitudes. Moreover, men's support for women's empowerment is essential. Programmes should be geared to helping men understand that gains for women benefit the family and the wider community.

Men's attitudes and behaviours are strongly influenced by societal expectations. Hence, effectively addressing violence against women also requires that the community support programmes to eliminate it. Community gatekeepers and other influential figures can play an important role in raising awareness about the issue and encouraging and reinforcing male participation.

**Community ownership and involvement of the media help to ensure that changes will be long-lasting.** In the early stages of the project, advocacy among gatekeepers and the creation of pressure groups was not welcomed. But after several years of implementation, the mechanisms for social change created through the project have become rooted in the community. Families now feel that social pressure groups are necessary. Violence against women is still largely considered a private matter, however communities are playing a pivotal role in bringing it out in the open and addressing it as a social issue. Project activities, along with exposure in the media, have changed the mindsets of men and others in the community. This, in addition to a sense of community ownership, ensures that the problem of violence against women will be effectively addressed over the long term.

**For advocacy to be successful, project personnel and experts who are disseminating information must be well-versed in their role and deeply committed to the project goals. This commitment must also extend up through the ranks of government.** Towards this end, project staff organized a one-day workshop with policy makers and planners of various government departments. A similar workshop was held at the *upazila* level, so that all relevant institutions were involved. Field workers in all 12 *upazila* were given six days' training. Women's affairs officers in each *upazila* were responsible for overall project implementation.

**Do not sideline a particular group on the assumption that they will be opposed to the project.** Never assume that a particular individual or group will be opposed to certain ideas before engaging them in discussion. In many cases, they can be won over. In Paba *upazila*, for example, the same religious leaders who were at first opposed to the project later turned into staunch advocates once they understood the rationale behind it. Moreover, through dialogue, ways can often be found to reconcile seemingly opposing views.

**The younger generation is an important target group, since they are often most receptive to new ideas.**

Moreover, they are typically the ones most directly affected by various forms of violence against women. Ultimately, it is only by reaching youth that the transmission of negative attitudes about women to the next generation can be curtailed.

**Maintaining continuity in project management and ensuring flexibility in implementation can increase the effectiveness of a project.**

One constraint to implementation was the high turnover of project directors, who were employed by the Government. It takes time to understand the local dynamics of a situation and to establish rapport with stakeholders. Thus, transfer of key personnel at both national and local levels can often disrupt project activities.

On the other hand, the flexibility built into the project design contributed to its success. Rather than a fixed set of activities, community members were given the opportunity to decide what types of gatherings or groups should be arranged, who should attend and what topics should be discussed. According to the original project director, adjustments to the project after "elaborate discussions" with the community "ensured the willing participation of the local population and facilitated the success of the project."

## PRACTICES THAT WORK

**Working through the existing value system to find positive aspects of a culture that can be used to promote change.** A project dealing with culturally sensitive issues must never assume that all traditions are harmful. The project gained effectiveness by highlighting certain religious values, for example, as well as tapping into the tradition of listening to, relying on and respecting one's elders. Traditional folk music was successfully adapted to challenge violence against women, along with the longstanding practice of courtyard gatherings. Project workers did not question the existing

9 UNFPA-Bangladesh. 2003. 'Assessing Male Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women'.

cultural heritage and value system. Rather, they highlighted aspects of the culture that could be cultivated or adapted to promote project objectives.

The chairman of the Union Council in Baragachha says that he uses traditional religious precepts when trying to influence abusive husbands who are also religious. For example, he reminds them of the respect accorded to mothers in the Koran—that 'Paradise lies under the feet of a mother'—and that the wife he has just beaten is the mother of his own child. "How can someone beat a mother?" he asks. He reports that such arguments are usually effective in changing behaviour.

**Cultivating the support of local power structures at all stages of implementation.**

To ensure community involvement, it was necessary to first secure the support of local leaders, public officials, and influential peer groups. In Paba, these included the *upazila* chairman and members, *Gram Sarkar* officials, religious leaders, school-teachers, village elders and politicians, who were brought together through the Community Support Group and became advocates for change in the community. The project was implemented in stages, and different goals were emphasized at different stages. As implementation proceeded, experiences from previous stages were consolidated and adjustments were made accordingly. Sustained support from gatekeepers and local power structures was essential in keeping the interest of the community/target group, therefore their input was always taken into consideration.

It may not be possible to involve a wide spectrum of leaders at the pre-design or project preparation stage.

However, they should be involved in project implementation. In Paba *upazila*, project activities were scheduled in consultation with community leadership. As a result, participation and ownership by the community was ensured.

*"We tried to form pressure groups within the community to discourage violence. Not only that, we also created opportunities for the community to plan their own programmes, and in that way the community began to own the project. Even when UNFPA support ends, the community will go on with the programme."*

— UNFPA focal point on gender

**Providing hard evidence and expert opinion.**

A community will not automatically accept the views of a project worker. Those views must be backed up by credible evidence and expert opinion. Research findings, news items and proceedings of court cases were all used to arouse awareness, and the opinions of specialists, such as religious leaders, doctors and lawyers, were solicited.

**Using culturally acceptable language and communication tools that have appeal for a wide audience.**

In rural settings especially, people enjoy the stimulation provided by videos, folk music, folk drama and other art forms, which not only provide entertainment but convey messages that are remembered and repeated. In the gatherings of women in the courtyard, *jarigan* (a type of folk song) and *jatra* (folk drama) sessions were held to bring home relevant messages. The women became so involved that many of them began singing and acting along with the performers. Many of these songs and dramas were created by local people so that the language, expressions and tones are familiar and create a lasting impression. Because of their appeal, the music and drama sessions were also held in the Community Support Group meetings. In addition, sessions were also arranged on various occasions, such as World Population Day and marriage ceremonies, and play a key role in advocacy.