

Voices from Bangladesh



Now I am happy. I have found something to look forward to. When I was married I could not talk – now I can talk about my wishes and rights.
Beneficiary

Family Planning Association of Bangladesh: Combating gender-based violence during pregnancy

This case study is one of a series of qualitative reviews called “IPPF Changing lives” which capture the stories of IPPF’s beneficiaries and clients from around the world. A rapid PEER (participatory ethnographic evaluation and research) approach was used to train project beneficiaries to interview people in their social network. These voices provide us with powerful testimonies on lives changed - in some cases, lives saved - and illustrate how IPPF is making a difference.

The Combating Gender-Based Violence during Pregnancy project significantly changed the lives of many women and girls in the Comilla district of Bangladesh who had experienced physical and emotional abuse from their husbands and/or mothers-in-law. They were often living in situations of extreme poverty, with little formal education and were isolated from family and social support networks. Early marriage was another issue that had negatively impacted on their rights, education and reproductive health.

The project – implemented by Family Planning Association of Bangladesh (FPAB) – focused on raising awareness about gender-based violence (GBV) and supporting vulnerable women by providing access to health and legal services and opportunities to enhance their financial self-sufficiency. The project provided training and support to women - and also to some men - on women’s reproductive health, women’s rights, GBV issues and early marriage.

Other activities included financial support for girls’ study and referral to legal services. Three survivors’ support groups were established to identify GBV survivors, refer them to FPAB for support services and hold meetings for mutual support and awareness raising. Three caretaker groups were established to prevent GBV through detection and referral of cases.

Although the initial project funding period has ended, the benefits have continued through the ongoing groups, and through the continuation of partners’ activities.

¹ www.options.co.uk/peer

My father forced me to marry when I was 13. My husband was 32. I was tortured every day – but was scared to protest. I took up a loan and set up a poultry farm... Once my husband saw me earning, he started respecting me more. ... My husband says: ‘She is now independent – I cannot do anything to her!’
Beneficiary



Achievements

The project has had a significant impact on the lives of a range of beneficiaries, including those most oppressed by GBV: the girls and women who were most subjugated by social norms which limited their ability to speak out and denounce unjust and inhumane treatment. Young girls also benefited through the prevention of early marriage. In addition, the project reached some men who reported changes in their own behaviour through increased awareness of women's rights and the damage caused by GBV.

The project has made significant changes to women beneficiaries' lives by providing increased access to legal and financial support, vocational training and loans, community-based advocacy and increased awareness of women's rights, which have raised women's status, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the community.

FPAB provided women with access to legal support through referring women to its partner Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST). This enabled women to take violent and non-supportive husbands to court to obtain restraining orders and financial support for themselves and their children. One woman who had been abused by her drug-using husband and mother-in-law described how access to legal support changed her life: "[FPAB] helped me with legal support. We took my husband to court and my husband apologized. He signed a paper in front of the judge agreeing that he will not take drugs and will provide for the family (...) Now he is better. He provides for me and my children."

Another major achievement was increasing women's knowledge and understanding of their rights. This knowledge enabled women to make informed decisions about whether to settle domestic disputes out of court, demand a full trial, or return to their husbands. It also resulted in abusive husbands being required to pay child support after women had left them. Women's increased knowledge of their rights, combined with access to legal support, substantially improved their physical safety, emotional wellbeing and

status within the household. For some, it even improved their mobility within the community. Before the project, many women said that they had to stay at home and were forbidden by their husbands to go out, even when they needed medical care.

The project also increased women's access to health facilities, including sexual and reproductive health facilities, by educating women and their husbands on the importance of antenatal care, and by training FPAB staff to recognize health problems and refer them to appropriate health services.

One of the key practical differences that the project made to women's lives was providing skills and vocational training to women who had experienced GBV. Training was accompanied by loans which enabled women to convert their newly acquired knowledge into income generating activities or formal employment. In some cases, women became the main earner in the household. Income generating skills also served to protect women from GBV by making them more highly valued and respected members of the household.

The project also significantly changed the lives of girls in Comilla through the prevention of early marriage and by promoting the importance of girls' education. The project campaigned to end early marriage and these efforts meant that early marriage was prevented in many instances.

Men's lives were also changed as a result of the project. Men who attended project meetings learned that GBV was a violation of women's rights and were also told about the effect of GBV on their children. They learned about how GBV can be a pattern of behaviour passed on from one generation to another. Men who participated in the project reported that they had become advocates for women experiencing GBV. They also acted as community educators, teaching other men that violent and abusive behaviour towards women, and early marriage for girls, were no longer considered to be acceptable.

Another major achievement of the project was the change in staff attitudes and behaviours. Several male staff members involved in the project reported that following involvement in the GBV project, they had re-examined their own attitudes and behaviours and had changed the way they related to their wives.

Challenges

One challenge the project faced was the difficulty of trying to change attitudes and secure justice when many structural issues conspired against this goal. Structural forces – such as the law enforcement system and high levels of poverty – upon which the project could have little impact, made its work especially challenging. Also, changing the attitudes and behaviour of local stakeholders, such as teachers and religious leaders, proved to be a slow and sometimes difficult process.

Another challenge was that some staff felt, or were actually, threatened by people in the community who objected to them working on issues of GBV and women's rights, and some individuals were bribed by influential people to drop cases.

Creating long term positive change is a potential challenge for the project, and it is not yet clear how successful the project has been in creating long term changes in gender relations and families' treatment of women. Interestingly, the majority of women interviewed had chosen to return to their formerly abusive husbands. This might seem surprising considering the extreme cruelty often suffered; however, it has to be understood in the cultural context of the project area. Women's return to their husband was partly due to the stigma and financial hardship faced by female headed households. In addition, many of these women emphasized the satisfaction they felt at having regained the right to reside with their children in the house of the husband's family, and at having become economically solvent, something that may, in the long run, ensure their protection from GBV.

Lessons

The project strategy of intensive, on the ground coverage, which included building strong relationships within local communities, was undoubtedly successful in reaching the most vulnerable women affected by GBV, including schoolgirls at risk of early marriage. The messages of the project were largely spread through a peer-to-peer approach, by training women within the community, including a number of traditional birth attendants, who subsequently discussed GBV-related issues with other community members. Local leaders, including teachers and religious leaders, also spread the project's messages in their own arenas of influence, including schools and mosques. This personal approach to initiating engagement facilitated the development of mutual trust and respect between project staff, volunteers and community members. It also motivated male and female volunteers to remain active and involved in the project.

Another important approach used to reach and support vulnerable women was through strategic partnerships with specialized legal, training and microcredit organizations. Access to these specialized services through the project led to significant change for women and girls. Working as an individual organization, FPAB would not have been able to provide the same level of support to these women.

The project's community groups (the caretaker groups and survivor support groups) are an example of a successful, innovative and thus far sustainable strategy. They require the active participation of local people including community leaders, religious authorities and women affected by GBV. Group members' enthusiasm and commitment are the key drivers of changing attitudes.

The project's broad-based approach and engagement with multiple stakeholders - particularly at the community level - has led to a reported reduction in GBV towards women by husbands and mothers-in-law in Comilla.

I realized through the training that when I stopped my wife from going outside alone, did not provide enough food, or was abusive to her – all were acts of violence. ... It will never happen again.

40-year old husband



On Fridays [leading the prayer meeting], I talk about women's rights – early marriage, wife's respect. We have seen a lot of changes in the last five years. Imam

She never knew before if she had any rights as a wife. She came to learn, and now she can make her husband know the rights of women. This is a major change. She can make her own decisions, move anywhere – give advice to other women.

Peer interviewer



Bangladesh ¹	
Country context	
Population (millions), 2007	157.8
Adult illiteracy rate (% aged 15 and above), 1999-2007	46.5
Population living below the national poverty line (%), 2000-2006	40.0
Life expectancy at birth (years), 2007	65.7
Context for women	
Female adult illiteracy rate (% aged 15 and above), 1999-2007	52.0
Earned income (estimated) (ratio of female to male), 2007	0.51
Ever-married women (aged 15-49) who have experienced sexual and/or physical violence (%), 2007	53.0 ²
Females (aged 6 and above, urban population) with no education (%), 2007	22.0
Females (aged 6 and above, rural population) with no education (%), 2007	32.0
Seats in parliament (% held by women), 2008	6.0

¹ UNDP, Human Development Report 2009, (Website, accessed on 22-03-10).

² 2007 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, (Website, accessed on 22-03-10).



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The International Planned Parenthood Federation is global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. We are a worldwide movement of national organizations working with and for communities and individuals.

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