

**act:onaid**

End poverty. Together.

# Stories from the Frontline



**11 Stories from Bangladesh**

# Stories from the Frontline



## ***11 Stories from Bangladesh***

**Impact Assessment & Shared Learning (IASL)  
ActionAid Bangladesh**

# Stories from the Frontline

## *11 Stories from Bangladesh*

Dhaka, December 2009

*Process facilitated in Bangladesh by:*

Samantha Hargreaves  
Abu Said Md. Juel Miah  
Zakir Hossain Sarker  
Partha Hefaz Shaikh

*Edited by:*

Pauline Stanford and Samantha Hargreaves

*Proofreading:*

Lucy Southwood and Samantha Hargreaves

*Design and layout:*

Hamlet Johannes and Blueshift Design

*Cover illustration:*

Alastair Findlay

**Copyright: ActionAid Bangladesh**

*Any part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means with due acknowledgement of the publisher.*

ISBN: 978-984-33-0942-6

*Published by:*

**Impact Assessment & Shared Learning (IASL)**

**ActionAid Bangladesh**

House-8, Road-136, Gulshan-1, Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh

Tel: (88-02) 8837796, 9894331, 9894216, 8835632, 8835398

Facsimile: (88-02) 8815087

Web: [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)



## ***'Stories from the Frontline'***

'Stories from the Frontline' emerge from an Impact Assessment and Shared Learning (IASL) initiative to support critical thinking about and documentation of ActionAid International's rights-based work for transformation and justice. The initiative, which is implemented at country level, aims more generally to strengthen our ability to write about change in an analytical, powerful and effective way. The Stories, written by the staff most intimately connected to our change work in the field or 'at the front', are developed through an empowering writing journey that begins with a five-day critical writing retreat. This is followed by a period of mentorship and peer support to deepen analysis, thinking and writing; and the journey concludes with an editing phase that is strongly oriented to building the confidence of the writers and strengthening their writing skills. Programme staff have been the main target of this initiative, but we have also supported writing about other dimensions of our change practice through policy and campaigns work, and through internal organisational change initiatives.

The process in Bangladesh was facilitated by:

- Samantha Hargreaves, International Shared Learning Coordinator.  
Email: [samantha.hargreaves@actionaid.org](mailto:samantha.hargreaves@actionaid.org)
- Abu Said Md. Juel Miah, Deputy Manager, Shared Learning Unit, IASL, AAB.  
Email: [juel.miah@actionaid.org](mailto:juel.miah@actionaid.org)
- Zakir Hossain Sarker, Manager, Reflect Development Unit, IASL, AAB.  
Email: [zakir.sarker@actionaid.org](mailto:zakir.sarker@actionaid.org)
- Partha Hefaz Shaikh, Head, Impact Assessment and Shared Learning, AAB  
Email: [partha.shaikh@actionaid.org](mailto:partha.shaikh@actionaid.org)

For any queries on the stories please contact the facilitators from ActionAid Bangladesh or the writers, and for more information related to the development of such an initiative please contact Samantha Hargreaves, International Shared Learning Coordinator, AAI.

### ***Acknowledgements:***

Special thanks to the mentors of writers from the Bangladesh pilot writing retreat (in alphabetical order): Asgar Ali Sabri (AA Bangladesh), David Archer (AA International), Ennie Chipembere (AA International), Everjoice Win (AA International), Jagat Patnaik (AA India), Laurie Adams (AA International), Malini S (AA India), Maneesh Pradhan (AA Nepal), Partha Hefaz Shaikh (AA Bangladesh), Samantha Hargreaves (AA International), Shafqat Munir (AA International), Shahidur Rahman (AA Bangladesh), Sriyani Perera (AA International), Tripti Rai (AA Nepal) and Yuko Yoneda (AA International).

# Content

I.	<i>Small initiative, big success</i>	1
	<i>By Abdul Momin</i>	
II.	<i>Demanding rights in the haor: making waves with the NaoJatra</i>	6
	<i>By Farhat Jahan</i>	
III.	<i>Taking a gender-aware school-based approach to disaster risk reduction</i>	14
	<i>By Khandaker Lutful Khaled</i>	
IV.	<i>Shuvadra wants to be a doctor, not a victim of early marriage</i>	26
	<i>By Kakoli Rani Das</i>	
V.	<i>Adolescent family life education: reducing violence against girls</i>	31
	<i>By Lubna Ferdowsi</i>	
VI.	<i>Positive steps on the road to establishing occupational health rights in Bangladesh</i>	36
	<i>By Munni Hoque</i>	
VII.	<i>Changing lives with school material supplies</i>	46
	<i>By Rajib Kundu</i>	
VIII.	<i>ActionAid Cyclone Sidr recovery programme benefits survivors, especially women</i>	51
	<i>Shirin Akhter</i>	
IX.	<i>Denied citizenship is recognised: The case of the Urdu-speaking Bihari community of Bangladesh</i>	57
	<i>By Subhagya Mangal Chakma</i>	
X.	<i>The Cyclone SIDR recovery programme in Patuakhali</i>	62
	<i>By Sumaiya Tahira</i>	
XI.	<i>Shiuly's fight against social norms leads the way for women's rights</i>	68
	<i>By Tahmina Huq</i>	



# Small initiative, big success

By Abdul Momin

## Summary:

*Although primary school education is compulsory in Bangladesh for children aged 6-10, access to education is difficult in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Challenging terrain, a lack of qualified teachers and adequate school facilities, the use of proxy teachers and ineffective school management committees all contribute to low school attendance and high drop-out rates. This is the story of how one local Reflect circle mobilised its community to demand their rights to a decent education for their children. Their action resulted in improved teaching at their local school, and had wider repercussions across the entire district. There is still a long way to go to ensure quality education for all, but this is a step in the right direction.*

## A story from the community of Chittagong Hill Tracts

Education is a fundamental right of all human beings, which opens insights and helps people develop their lives. Childhood is the most important period to get into education. Unfortunately, across Bangladesh many children are deprived of education and grow up unable to read or write. This is particularly the case in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), where access to primary schools remains difficult. The challenging terrain and the lack of qualified teachers and adequate learning spaces are the main hindrances. Although many schools have one or two teachers, they do not attend school regularly, often hiring proxy teachers who are not effective and cannot ensure quality education. In addition, multilingual education has yet to be realised, and schools offer lessons only in Bengali, which is not the mother tongue of children in the CHT.

Following the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, the government of Bangladesh made primary education compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 10.<sup>1</sup> In Bangladesh, this has had a major impact on gross school enrolment rates. By 2005, gross enrolment had increased from 75% to 93.71%,

<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh Education for All (EFA) National Plan of Action II 2003-2015. In light of the Dakar Framework for Action on EFA and the millennium development goals, governments from 164 countries adopted six ambitious targets for education for all children, youth and adults to be achieved by 2015.

with 16.2 million children (about 8.13 million female and 8.09 million male) in 80,401 primary schools, making Bangladesh one of the largest primary systems in the world.<sup>2</sup> The government also distributes free books and education kits to primary school pupils. In recent years, Bangladesh has made significant progress in the education sector, achieving a primary enrolment rate of over 93.71% and gender parity at both primary and secondary levels.

Nevertheless, drop-out rates are still high, particularly among girls, and the lack of universal access to education for all children – irrespective of location, ethnicity, race, religion or gender remains a problem. Access to education is an issue, particularly for children in remote areas, from extremely poor households or ethnic minority groups and with special needs. The drop-out rate among these groups is especially high. Moreover, due to the unique status of the CHT in terms of topography, diversity and recurring socio-political conflict, both the quality of and access to primary education are far below national average (CHT literacy rate is 34.1% 43.3% among men and 22.33% among women, compared to 93.71%.<sup>3</sup>

This story focuses on quality education because ActionAid believes that a lack of basic education and illiteracy are among the main causes of poverty. ActionAid Bangladesh is therefore working for free quality child education provided by the state. At the same time, ActionAid Bangladesh works on strengthening communities and civil society, mobilising them to seek accountability from the authorities responsible for ensuring quality education.

Since 2000 Green Hill<sup>4</sup> and ActionAid Bangladesh have been jointly implementing a programme to raise awareness of the rights of indigenous communities to access government services. Education is the major component of the programme: Green Hill has organised village-based group discussions to raise awareness among local people, forming *Reflect*<sup>5</sup> circles to help people claim their rights.

---

<sup>2</sup> Banbeis 2005: Primary Education 2005, <http://www.banbeis.gov.bd>

<sup>3</sup> District: Educational institution, [www.bangla2000.com](http://www.bangla2000.com) and Rangamati District, <http://www.banglapedia.org>

<sup>4</sup> Green Hill, a partner organization of Action Aid Bangladesh, is working with indigenous people under the Diversity & Citizenship theme of AAB in Baghaichari, Jurachari and Rangamati Sadar Upazila under the Rangamati hill district. Since 2000, Green Hill has been working with the target groups - mostly women, children, fishermen, school management committees and agriculture groups - to improve diversity & citizen rights in the project area.

<sup>5</sup> Reflect is an approach to learning and social change. Key to the Reflect approach is creating a space where people feel comfortable to meet and discuss issues relevant to them and their lives. Reflects aims to improve the meaningful participation of people in decisions that affect their lives by strengthening their ability to communicate.

### **Villagers in Chuma Chumi Village Mobilise for Education**

Before Green Hill started working in ChumaChumi village, in Jurachari union of Rangamati district, local people did not know why they were deprived of education and many other fundamental rights. This story tells how they were mobilised to establish their children's right to education. One of the things local people noted was that parents have a very strong urge to send their children to school. However this initial enthusiasm becomes constrained by two main causes: insufficient infrastructure and facilities in schools; and the fact that children often have to work to help support their families.

Although there is a lack of primary schools across the CHT, the village of ChumaChumi had a primary school. A teacher was posted to the school, but did not attend regularly, blaming its remoteness and the lack of transportation facilities. This is a common problem with primary schools in the CHT.

When community members set up the *Reflect* circle, they initially focused on literacy and numeracy skills. Through the *Reflect* approach they moved on to discussing the problems of the community and looked for solutions through analysis, discussion and planning. This process helped increase awareness among participants, who came to understand that education is a fundamental right that is directly linked with lives and livelihoods, and an effective instrument for development. They became conscious of the necessity of education and realised that they had been deprived of an opportunity which the state had allocated to them. They found out that the problems they faced were shared with schools beyond their village. Because schools lacked teachers or were only staffed by one or two teachers, they could rarely attend school, and often took the opportunity to misuse their position, by not reporting to the authorities and discouraging any new appointments for fear of losing control to new teachers. They remained absent and hired proxy teachers to teach in their place, who were often neither effective nor qualified to teach the students. The proxy teachers did not come to school regularly either, and would not take responsibility as a regular teacher another hindrance to ensuring education. Given the situation, children also remained absent and lost enthusiasm for going to school.

One day, two *Reflect* facilitators led a discussion with 40 members on how they can ensure quality education for their children. Only one teacher (also the Head Mistress) was allocated to ChumaChumi Primary School. She did not attend school regularly, but hired a proxy teacher instead, paying her 1,000 taka, or 15% of her salary. The proxy teacher did not have the same qualifications as the official teacher to teach the students.



Considering the situation, the participants discussed the issue in their circles and came up with an action plan. They decided to take the issue up with the school management committee first, and go to the concerned educational authorities if the committee would not take any action. After several meetings



with the school management committee failed to get the teacher to attend school regularly, the *Reflect* participants understood that the committee was weak and some members were also corrupt. They decided to approach the higher educational authority with the whole community.

In the meantime, they organised meetings with parents and the wider community to raise awareness of the issue. They told them about their meetings with the school management committee and the results, and made clear what should be their next step. Then they collected signatures of support from the community. With the cooperation of Green Hill and ActionAid Bangladesh they prepared a memorandum and sent it, with the collected signatures, to the office of the chief executive of the sub-district. They also sent a copy to other concerned departments. In the memorandum they mentioned: their discussions with the school management committee; the teacher crisis in all schools throughout the area; and the fact that schools are run by proxy teachers instead of appointed teachers. They requested the authorities to take the necessary steps to address this situation.

As a result of their petition, the administration formed a committee to investigate the situation in the school. After a few days the committee presented a report based on their findings, which supported the community's application. There was a strong recommendation against both the proxy teacher and the regular teacher. They also found that it was not only a problem in that particular school, but in all schools throughout CHT. The authority consequently took the necessary steps against the proxy teacher.

The Head Mistress of ChumaChumi Primary School has returned and started working regularly. The authorities supervise and monitor the teacher's attendance at school and maintain quality education. The trend of using proxy teachers has now changed, not only in this school, but across the entire education system in the Rangamati District. The authority has started ensuring

that appointed teachers are closely supervised and monitored. Meanwhile, Green Hill started advocacy work with the school management committee, which has since started performing more actively. Committee members now supervise and monitor the teachers' regularity and teaching quality and are actively mobilising community members to increase enrolment in schools. Parents and guardians are now aware of the importance of education and as a result are enthusiastic to enrol their children at school and ensure their regular attendance. In addition, as a result of the *Reflect* circle's action, the education department provided some recreational facilities at the primary schools, making the children enthusiastic to attend school regularly.

Enrolment rates in both pre-school and primary schools in CHT is increasing: on average there is 78% attendance in the project area, compared to 28.53% (17.46% for girls and 39.6% for boys) before the intervention. But the shortage of teachers has not been fully addressed yet, and communities and the education authorities are still working to address the shortage of teachers and increase the teacher-student ratio. They are also trying to introduce primers (books) for children in their own language. For example, the Bandarban Hill District Council, in addition to its normal programme of promoting literacy and ensuring education for all, has introduced primers in two local languages Bawm and Marma in a pilot initiative in some primary schools. It is hoped that the opportunity to study in their mother tongue will help the children of the CHT to increase their capacity to develop themselves, their communities and the country. It will also help sensitise the government towards addressing the issues in line with the demands of the local people. There is a great need to allocate more education support in the CHT. This will need to be addressed by supporting non-formal education as well as formal education to reach those children not currently attending school.

### Biography:



#### **Abdul Momin**

**Programme Officer, Monitoring and Evaluation,  
ActionAid Bangladesh**

**[abdul.momin@actionaid.org](mailto:abdul.momin@actionaid.org)**

I have been at ActionAid Bangladesh for just over a year, and value the commitment, honesty and transparency I have found at ActionAid. My abilities to work confidently under pressure and cope with fast-changing situations help me to ensure the quality of ActionAid's work in the field.

# ***Demanding rights in the haor: making waves with the NaoJatra***

**By Farhat Jahan**

## **Summary:**

*The people of the haor – the wetlands of north-eastern Bangladesh have been marginalised and systematically denied their rights for hundreds of years. But social organisations and movements have helped raise awareness among poor people here and they are now standing up and demanding their rights – to land, access to water resources, and a livelihood. This is the story of a colourful popular campaign to mobilise people to raise their voice against poverty and hunger. The NaoJatra was a seven-day boat caravan that travelled across 400 kilometres of waterways, holding meetings, cultural events and other activities to raising awareness of the issues the haor people face and to demand sustainable agriculture and economic justice in the area. The NaoJatra successfully drew the attention of national and local government, as well as the media, and inspired the people of the haor to stand up for their rights to access local resources.*

## **Introduction**

The *haor* is an internationally important wetland ecosystem in north-eastern Bangladesh where bowl-shaped depressions between the natural levees of a river are subject to monsoon flooding. Although the haor basin has abundant natural resources, these are not enough to fulfil local people's needs. Through the area has been bypassed by mainstream development. The land and people have been facing deprivation and disaster for centuries, while socio-economic justice and sustainable agriculture are not being achieved. ActionAid Bangladesh and its partner, BARCIK, have been working in the haor lands since 2006, to establish poor people's rights to resources to ensure a human life. The *NaoJatra*, or boat caravan, was a popular campaign to mobilise people to raise their voice against poverty and hunger. A successful continuation of our work in the haor basin, the demands of the *NaoJatra* were the heartiest desires of haor people. We helped them raise their voices and explore solidarity through the boat caravan campaign, which helped bring about positive, practical and constructive change for the haor people.

## Background

The haor basin covers an area of approximately 24,500km<sup>6</sup>, with 48 upazilas (sub-districts) under seven administrative districts.<sup>7</sup> The haor basin includes 47 major haors and some 6,300 beels (smaller bodies of water) of varying size, 3,500 of which are permanent. The total population of the haor belt is estimated at about 20 million, and 49% are landless. The majority of the population is Muslim, while nearly 16% are Hindu. Most of the people are ethnic Bengali, though they speak different dialects. There are just over 6,500 people from other ethnic groups, who have their own languages.



The haor and some local boys

The land, water and fish are the major source of livelihoods in the haor belt the major occupation is farming (41.43%), followed by agricultural labour (19.15%) and fishing (2.58%).<sup>8</sup> Farmers also work as seasonal fisherman because their lands become wetland during the rainy season. The haors are considered to be the most productive wetland resources of Bangladesh, with a large biodiversity and also serves as a natural reservoir. Boro (dry season) cultivation is the main source of grains and the land is known as motherland of rice due to the bumper production. The land contributes an annual average of about 1,020,000 million taka in national revenue, but the majority of the people who live there cannot get access to sufficient resources.

## Background to the deprivations

The problems the haor people face are many: a lack of access to resources; manmade and natural disasters; a lack of employment; poor communication and transportation; trans-border assaults; and ignorance of bilateral issues regarding India-Bangladesh water sharing. These and other factors make the haor people more vulnerable. The situation of the women in the haor belt is no better than other areas of Bangladesh. From time immemorial the haor people have been marginalised and deprived of their basic rights. Under British rule

<sup>6</sup> Bangladesh Haor and Water Development Board (BHWDB) statistics, 2005

<sup>7</sup> Bangladesh Center for Advance Studies (BCAS), *Wetlands of Bangladesh*, 1994

<sup>8</sup> Banglapedia 2004

they got access to the water bodies in return for nominal revenue, but the leasing system introduced in the 1960s destroyed poor people's access to water bodies and benefited the local elites. Internal migration and the lack of access to water bodies and land has marginalised people.

The economy of the haor belt depends mainly on fishing and agriculture. Rice, which is cultivated in the boro season, is the major agricultural crop. Farmers are always afraid of flash floods that destroy their crops: during the last five years local farmers have only been able to harvest one boro rice crop without damage. As a result the majority of farming communities have been displaced and are shifting their occupation. Newspaper reports reveal that continuous crop failures have pushed many farmers into rickshaw pulling or day labour.

The other important resource is open-water fishing. Flooding in the monsoon season removes the rigid boundaries of private lands, and the fisheries resources of the floodplain become common property. Traditionally people had customary rights and free access to the fishery resources on the open water. But with the leasing system depriving poor people of access to the water bodies, their rights to livelihood and common property are being denied by the power structure and state. According to government policy, poor people can access the water through fishermen cooperative societies, but in practice these are controlled by powerful political leaders and businessmen. Through corruption, many political leaders, musclemen and landlords are getting access to water bodies and land while the poor are deprived. But now numerous social organisations are working in the region and poor people have awakened from their sleep. They are now demanding their rights to water and land.



While a significant number of people in the haor basin are landless, it is also quite hard for them to access khas (state-owned) land. By law, landless people must be offered the khas land, but in reality most of this land is grabbed by powerful people. This situation leaves landless people uprooted from agriculture and facing economic instability.

## **Involvement and intervention**

Since 2006, ActionAid has been supporting a BARCIK programme to address the rights of local people by developing integrated haor management policy for sustainable crop production. The programme gained appreciation from the government, social agencies and communities in the haor areas. Over the last two years participatory research through people's consultations and conventions; publications; press conferences; community-based awareness meetings; policy dialogue; and exchange expeditions; and sharing on the programme's bilateral effects have revealed many important issues. The programme has raised awareness, organised communities, promoted engagement between social agencies and community, and drawn the attention of media and policymakers. The people of the haor basin have for years been suffering many problems, and the time had come to establish economic justice in access to natural resources. ActionAid and BARCIK have been working closely together with local groups and community-based organisations in the haor belts, using policy dialogue and media coverage to draw the government's attention to the right to life and livelihood.

The NaoJatra, or boat caravan, was one key event in our series of activities. The idea of using the NaoJatra to draw the government's attention came from the haor people and was jointly organised by numerous people's organisations working in the haor basin – BARCIK, ActionAid, Imagine New South Asia (INSA) and Shaptahik2000. Several local organisations – including Haorbasi Rockhay Nagorik Uddog, Sunamjang Lawyer Association and Tahirpur Fishing Community Society were also involved in the campaign.

## **Objectives of the boat caravan**

The caravan was organised with the following major objectives:

- To access people's views regarding access to resources and disseminate these to the authorities, to thus address the underlying rights of the haor people.
- To create mass awareness in favour of implementing the Sunamganj Declaration-1414, adopted in the Sunamganj Haor Convention in 2007; to pressurise government to consider the Sunamganj Declaration demands in its annual development programme.
- To draw the attention of national policymakers, journalists, development workers, social agencies and others to the suffering caused by the lack of access to resources through: unjust leasing system of water bodies; man-made disasters (caused by embankments and sluice gates); natural disasters; the commercialisation of agriculture; the lack of employment opportunities; poor communication (infrastructure and information); trans-border assaults;

and bilateral issues affecting people living around Haor basin.

**In order to ensure sustainable agriculture and economic justice in the haor area the NaoJatra focused on:**

- stopping the unjust lease system to establish people's rights to fish in the natural water bodies
- combating unjust global markets to save haor agriculture, local producers and farmers
- battling against corporate mining to save haor agriculture and farmers
- opposing 'man-made' flash floods and sand-filling to save haor river land
- spread knowledge of the history of the people's movement history in the haor basin to inspire people to uphold their rights
- implementing integrated policy to save haor agro-biodiversity
- ensuring the implementation of unique haor policies.

### **Our campaign**

Over seven days, the NaoJatra crossed about 400 kilometres of waterways, including 15 rivers and 20 haors. About 200 people gathered for the campaign in five boats. The seven-day caravan was held on 11-17 July 2008 and across seven sub-districts of Sunamganj district. The core demands and issues were:

- halting trans-boarder assaults on haor people's lives and saving haor agriculture and ecology
- combating corporate aggression on local haor markets
- resisting the unjust leasing system to access the natural water bodies.

The boat caravan mobilised people by distributing leaflets and posters; holding local bazaar meetings, spot meetings, people's consultations and rallies; forming human chains and resource chains; exchanging local assets and knowledge; planting trees and distributing saplings; cultural shows and activities including musical teams, a children's art competition and an award for local intellectuals. The busy, colourful campaign made a great impact on the haor people. It had been a long break since the people's movement of Bhasan Pani (open water) in the 1980s – and people organised themselves once again, using the NaoJatra to gather together and to compile their heartiest desires and demands. The NaoJatra created a new wave of hope and inspiration in haor people's life.



The leasing system used on the haors prevents people from accessing water bodies. Although water is the main resource for life and livelihood in the haor basin, people cannot access it due to the mismanagement of the leasing system. At Darmapasha upazila the caravan team championed the demands of the local people and engaged in discussion with the local administration, raising the issue of reformulating the leasing system. The people of the haor basin have been involved in various earlier movements and attempts for positive change such as the Nankar Rebellion against bonded labour during British rule; farmer movements; the Bhasan Pani movement; and others. But betrayal by political leaders, abuse of power and politics, and a lack of state intervention have all prevented these people from establishing their rights. Today people are choosing social rather than political organisations. In the 1980s, the haor people organised the Bhasan Pani movement to establish water body rights for poor people. Although the movement essentially failed, people continue to cherish the spirit of it in their souls – and the caravan has reignited that spirit. Through the NaoJatra people of the haor are again claiming their rights to open water bodies. Agriculture is also a priority concern of the haor basin, and through the caravan people demanded sustainable agriculture and justice.

The haor basin has plentiful natural resources and is renowned as the motherland of rice. However, with the expansion of commercial farming in the area, agriculture and natural resources are now controlled by the corporate sector. Local agriculture in Sunamjang depends on commercial agricultural inputs, which are controlled by multinational companies. Even the remote Madhdanagar and Sachna bazaar is now in the grip of multinational products and companies. Local producers and farmers have found themselves excluded from the local market system – they are consumers rather than entrepreneurs and traders. Farmers, local producers, and labourers used the NaoJatra to mobilise against the corporatisation of agriculture and resources.

North-eastern Bangladesh is bordered on two sides by the Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya. In seven districts around 7 lakh, 84 thousand (784,000 hectares) of







water lands is basically referred to as haor. The sources of the rivers that feed these bodies of water – the Jadukata, Rocti, Maharam, Patlaye, Dacna, Borchora, Boulayee, Sunayee, Rharam, Khasiamara and Choltee are all in India's water catchment. Furthermore, some of the haors – Mattain, Shonir, Tanguar, Songsar, Khorchar and Kanglar in particular are adjacent to the valleys of

Meghalaya. Deforestation and mining in the mountains on the Indian side combine with heavy rainfall to create disasters such as flash floods, landslides and sand filling (silting up). As a result, people of the haor basin have lost crops and agricultural land, destroying traditional farming. Such trans-boarder assaults have left the haor people more vulnerable. This is why people used the NaoJatra to oppose flash floods and sand filling to save crops planted on haor river land.

Social initiatives such as the NaoJatra need to link up with political processes to ensure their demands lead to sustainable development. Through the NaoJatra campaign the people of the haor tried to draw the attention of the government, people's representatives and political leaders. The idea came from the people; they identified that they are people of waterways and that they would use a boat caravan to relay their messages. The government, people's representatives and media were the primary actors to convey the messages of poor people's rights on a national and regional level. Others who responded to the idea of the campaign were political actors and the elites who benefit from the leases. They did not want the people to mobilise to demand their rights, but the haor people stood firm. Since completing the NaoJatra people are more enthusiastic about reclaiming their rights as they recall their memories of past struggle. The people of the haor feel that the vibrant and striking NaoJatra reinforced their coming together to struggle for a better life and livelihood.

## Immediate impact

- The caravan has drawn the attention of the local administration of Dharmapa upazila to the demands to protect the rights of poor people in the haor. The administration cordially received the NaoJatra team and expressed solidarity with their demands. They believe that demarcation of water bodies should ensure poor people's access on them. To make sure that the process is strengthened, the administration invited NGOs to work with them on this.

After the caravan finished the local administration of Darmapasa organised another caravan to demarcate the water body.

- The caravan also drew the attention of the national government and after NaoJatra was finished a chief advisor visited the haor districts and added the demands of the NaoJatra to the government's haor development process plan. To ensure progress with the development process, the government formed an inter-ministry haor committee.
- Local people mobilised, and were inspired by the caravan and they gave solidarity to the process.
- The government decided to change the school calendar so it is in harmony with the haor ecology.

## End note

The NaoJatra is a continuation of the activities of ActionAid Bangladesh and its partner, BARCIK, and one of the ways we have helped the haor people to campaign, claim and establish their rights. All our interventions have been working towards claiming and protecting these rights and the people have been prepared to support these activities. We believe that through the NaoJatra the people have been inspired to stand up for their rights to the haor resources.

## Biography:



### Farhat Jahan

Deputy Manager, Economic Justice, ActionAid Bangladesh

[farhat.jahan@actionaid.org](mailto:farhat.jahan@actionaid.org)

Farhat Jahan has a Masters in Political Science and is currently studying towards her PhD in Anthropology, the focus of which is 'Globalization, Ethnicity and Changing Saoutal (an indigenous community of Bangladesh) Culture'. Farhat, who describes herself as a social development activist, has been working in ActionAid Bangladesh since 2003. She wants to change and improve poor and marginalized people's lives through her experience and knowledge. She enjoys diverse cultural environments, and is committed to "make some footprints through her work".

# Taking a gender-aware school-based approach to disaster risk reduction

By Khandaker Lutful Khaled

## Summary:

*The world currently has a wealth of knowledge and information on how to reduce the impact of disasters. The important thing is making this information available to communities so they can make informed decisions and take the necessary action to protect themselves, their property and their livelihoods. ActionAid Bangladesh's disaster risk reduction through schools project aims to make schools structurally safer while also transforming them into centres for risk reduction, where communities can get organised for disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation. This initiative mainly targets poor and marginalised people who are basically deprived of their rights, particularly girls and women, whose subordinate position in the family, arising out of patriarchy and traditionally embedded cultural values, makes them more vulnerable.*

## Introduction

Because of its geo-physical features, Bangladesh is hugely exposed to disasters such as floods, cyclones, tidal surges and droughts. Every year countless people face the challenges of survival against disasters. From a rights perspective, it is obvious that the government should take the major responsibility in addressing these challenges. However, in a responsive and resilient society, the community must also play a crucial role, both regarding disaster preparedness and in post-disaster response. Research and the experience of development interventions also suggest that it is the communities themselves who can better understand their position and



condition, and are therefore better able to articulate practical ways to ensure their better future through overcoming challenges. Nevertheless, community-based disaster preparedness initiatives are still inadequate and, most importantly, are often characterised by unequal gender relations and a lack of women's participation.

Although disaster events are by nature gender blind, their consequences seem to be more severe for women than men. Women, on average, are more vulnerable than men in disasters. As such, disaster preparedness endeavours need to promote equal participation of both women and men. However, embedded patriarchal practices and gender-based discrimination have reinforced and weakened most disaster preparedness endeavours. The contribution of women and girls towards the community is rarely valued or even recognised, although they play an enormous role. ActionAid Bangladesh, with support from the UK's Department for International Development, has been implementing a project titled 'Disaster risk reduction through schools' (DRRS), with the purpose of making schools in high-risk disaster areas safer, enabling them to act as a locus for disaster risk reduction, and thus institutionalising the implementation of the Hyogo Framework<sup>9</sup> within education systems. As well as safer schools, DRRS aims to ensure that all the women and men in communities are organised around schools for disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation. More widely, the project is expected to demonstrate an effective methodology which will be replicable in other schools and able to influence national-level policy and practices for disaster risk reduction.

## **Gender equality in Bangladesh in the context of disaster risk reduction**

The current state of Bangladesh suggests immediate measures need to be taken to reduce the risks of disasters and their effects or impacts. Effective processes, practices, or structures have to be put in place to moderate or offset potential damages of disasters or to take advantage of the opportunities associated with disasters.<sup>10</sup> Some important questions are: Who can serve the nation best? In a community, which is the most acceptable and esteemed institution? Who has the most potential to be leaders of society with knowledge and wisdom? The answers to all these questions are probably schools and the people associated

---

<sup>9</sup> The Hyogo Framework for Action, adopted by 168 governments in 2005, is a ten-year global blueprint for disaster risk reduction efforts. Its goal is to substantially reduce disaster losses in terms of lives, social, economic and environmental assets by 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Some disasters, like floods, actually help the agriculture system by carrying away a lot of silt.

with them. Schools, in collaboration with communities, can play a leading role by fostering a knowledge-based social movement that can contribute to bringing the resilience of the community to the fore.

If a country wants to equip its people for disaster risk reduction, it must focus on its child population, because they are the future citizens, leaders and policymakers. It should also identify the people who are most vulnerable to disasters and how their vulnerabilities can be reduced. While a school is an institution that is present in every community, it also has a very good level of acceptance among the people. Therefore, in any community the school can be the locus in terms of disaster risk reduction, and the community can be organised around it. However, identifying adverse disaster-induced impacts is not sufficient it is equally important to promote knowledge and good practice regarding disaster risk reduction and build a culture of safety and resilience. Eventually, this process will lead to gender equality through enhanced self-confidence, resources, coping abilities, freedom of choice and more balanced power relations. It is assumed that gender equality contributes substantially to the wellbeing of women and reduces women's vulnerability.

## **Education and disaster risk reduction**

Disaster is defined as a serious disruption to the functioning of a community or a society, causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which often exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources. People are threatened by disasters because of their physical, social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities. Disasters are not preventable events, but the cause of disasters is often rooted in a community, because of its vulnerability. The above definition of disasters connotes that disaster risks can be reduced and in some cases removed altogether by supporting people's ability to resist the impacts.

Disaster risk reduction entails the framework of elements considered with the possibilities of reducing vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout a society, to avoid (prevention) or to limit (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards, within the broad context of sustainable development. This framework includes the following fields of action:

- knowledge development, including: education, training, research and information
- public commitment and institutional frameworks, including: organisational, policy, legislation and community action
- application of measures, including: environmental management; land-use

and urban planning; protection of critical facilities; application of science and technology; partnership and networking; and financial instruments

- early warning systems, including: forecasting, dissemination of warnings, preparedness measures and reaction capacities.

The world currently has a wealth of knowledge and information on how to reduce the impact of disasters. The important thing is making this information available to people and sharing and using it on a large scale as well as in a productive manner through awareness-raising and educational initiatives to enable people to make informed decisions and take action to ensure their resilience to disasters.



## **Participatory vulnerability analysis: the key to mobilising women and men**

The very task of uniting communities and creating the apparatus of collective efforts is quite intricate. In this connection, participatory vulnerability analysis (PVA) has proven to be a successful systematic process that could involve communities and other stakeholders in an in-depth analysis of their vulnerability. At the same time, this process empowers or motivates participants to take the required actions. PVA is based on the reality that communities know their own situations best and therefore any analysis should be built on their knowledge of local conditions. PVA always gives emphasis to the most vulnerable, and therefore particularly brings women and children into the analysis framework as well as engaging them in decision making, since in most cases their voices have remained unheard. PVA helps to bring about the empowerment of communities, who analyse their own vulnerability; draw up action plans and mobilise resources; and advocate to influence the relevant policies and practices to reduce their vulnerability to disasters. In short, reducing risk and vulnerability to disasters requires understanding among women and men on how they can best protect themselves, their property and their livelihoods. School-based disaster risk reduction education provides an enormous opportunity for the functioning of an effective interactive process of mutual learning among people and institutions. It encompasses far more than formal education in schools and universities, and involves the recognition and use of traditional wisdom and local knowledge for protection from natural

hazards. The underlying causes of disaster vulnerability are inequality, discrimination and exploitation. Vulnerability to natural disasters is also the result of weak governmental institutions; their little enforcement power and poor development policy decisions have the greatest impact on poor people. In the case of Bangladesh, the patriarchal practices embedded in society and the inequality between women and men also contribute to this vulnerability.

## **Bangladesh's commitments to disaster risk reduction**

Bangladesh is committed to reducing the risks of disasters in accordance with various national and international milestones, agreements and conventions. Among these, the World Conference on Disaster Reduction is the prime reference point. This conference, which took place on 18-22 January 2005 in Hyogo, Japan, adopted the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) – a worldwide understanding and dedicated commitment to a disaster risk reduction agenda for 2005-2015. The HFA gives priority to the following five areas of action:

1. Ensuring that disaster risk reduction is a national priority, with a strong institutional base for implementation
2. Identifying, assessing and monitoring disaster risks and enhanced early warning
3. Using knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels
4. Reducing the underlying risk factors
5. Strengthening disaster preparedness for effective response

## **School-based approach to disaster risk reduction**

Disaster risk reduction through schools (DRRS) aims to contribute towards the implementation of the HFA at country level. The purpose of this initiative is to make schools in high-disaster risk areas safer, enabling them to act as a locus for disaster risk reduction and to engage the education sector in the HFA. The major component of this project is schools – as an institution that is hugely accepted by communities, schools have great potential to educate learners as well as the wider community about disaster risk reduction.

DRRS aims to ensure that schools will be physically and structurally safer in high-risk disaster (cyclone, flood and earthquake-prone) areas and that



PVA exercise is going on in Golachipa, Patuakhali

communities are well organised around schools for disaster preparedness and vulnerability reduction. Participatory vulnerability analysis (PVA) is the working methodology of this initiative which aims to introduce disaster awareness and promote action for disaster risk reduction in local education. Increasingly, disaster risks are the results of climate change. All of ActionAid Bangladesh's disaster risk reduction endeavours take climate change into account. The DRRS project will expand the role that schools play in helping communities assess and adapt to climate change, tracking trends and balancing the knowledge of elders with new evidence. DRRS also aims to influence national-level policy and practice based on local examples of excellence in disaster risk reduction through schools.

ActionAid Bangladesh's DRRS project started in late 2006 and will continue till 2009. It is being implemented in two districts of Bangladesh: Kurigram in the north and Patuakhali in the south. Kurigram district has earned an unenviable name for being one of the most vulnerable areas of the country. Visited by floods even when the rest of the country remains unaffected, Kurigram is in the high-risk earthquake zone and is liable to river erosion. Even though disaster preparedness work has been undertaken to a limited extent, schools have rarely been utilised as a centre for such initiatives.

Patuakhali district, located in the coastal belt, is prone to cyclones. It was hit by massive cyclones in 1970 and 1990, and is predicted to be most likely to fall victim to climate change and subsequent sea-level rise. The prevalence of char (river islands) land in this district makes it one of the most remote and



inaccessible parts of the country. It is also very underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure. The education system has been on the back foot due to the inaccessible topographical nature of the area. Schools are few and far between, and have serious accessibility problems, and the area's remoteness means that attendance – both of teachers and students – is dismally low. In Kurigram the DRRS project is being implemented in two sub districts: Kurigram Sadar Upazilla and Ulipur Upazilla; while in Patuakhali it is implemented in just one: Golachipa.



## **Incorporating gender into disaster risk reduction**

The DRRS initiative principally targets poor and marginalised people who are basically deprived of their rights. Because women – who comprise half of the poor community – are the most vulnerable, the DRRS project gives most emphasis to women. DRRS initiatives are working closely with 31 schools where the project can work directly with schoolgirls.

### **The following are some critical areas where DRRS is incorporating gender issues in its interventions:**

Participation of poor and marginalised girls and women: The DRRS project started working in remote islands like Char Bangla, which have low-level participation of both women and men in social and political activities. DRRS created an opportunity where girls and women are getting involved in local social and political activities, using PVA to enable them to identify and analyse their vulnerabilities. Poor and marginalised women not only mentioned their vulnerabilities induced by natural disasters, but also came up with an action plan on how those vulnerabilities can be reduced. PVA was also conducted with youth, particularly school students. Natural disasters make students and their learning process immensely vulnerable. The school buildings are often rendered useless due to fragile structural conditions, while in most cases the roads that connect the schools turn out to be hugely disrupted. Add to this damage to student houses and their study materials – books, writing pads etc – and children become one of the most vulnerable groups in disasters. Nearly 50% of these children are girls, who are the worst victim of disasters. School girls took part in the PVA exercise with a lot of enthusiasm.

One of the major landmarks of women's qualitative participation in the community's social and political arena is facilitating a proactive community audit team. This audit team, comprised of 20-25 members, half of whom are women, examine and assess the outcome of a development project or programme in the community in line with its original objectives and commitments to the community. The DRRS project has facilitated such teams in every area where it works.

Schools-cum-shelters for destitute women, children and elderly people: Although the DRRS project is working with 18 schools in Kurigram and 13 schools in Patuakhali, our baseline survey at the outset of the project shows that there are hundreds of other schools in these areas that are at risk of disasters. Within the 31 schools where we work, capital investments were made in three schools to make them safer from natural disasters. In each district, particular schools were identified as being at high risk of recurring natural

disasters, so there was an immediate need to save these schools and school-based communities. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that Bangladesh recently experienced two successive floods, mighty river erosion and the super cyclone Sidr in quick succession. Apart from the memory of ruinous devastation done by these disasters, the DRRS project also has some optimistic experiences of them.

Because they are accepted by communities who feel a level of ownership over them, schools have played an instrumental role in saving the lives and properties of vulnerable people in disaster-risk areas. For example, in Char Bangla, ActionAid supported the construction of a school-cum-cyclone-shelter which saved 700 people on the night that Sidr struck. Similarly, more than 2,300 people took shelter during floods in the Kurigram schools where ActionAid has supported increased safety measures. ActionAid wants to replicate this positive experience in other disaster-risk-prone areas to save people and their property.

Safe school, drinking water and sanitation facilities for girls: Every child has the right to safe water, basic sanitation and a healthy school environment. For most people, fulfilling children's right to education ends in the provision of school buildings, teachers and learning materials that equip the children to read and write. However, the fact that a favourable learning environment goes beyond the mere provision of these, is often overlooked. As a result, a lot of schools in Bangladesh have deplorable sanitary conditions, especially for girls, who often don't attend school because of the lack of appropriate and private sanitation facilities. Lack of access to safe water and sanitation causes poor health, irregular school attendance and diminished performance. The demand for these essential facilities increases particularly when any disaster occurs because after an emergency situation the minimum facilities for sanitation collapse.

Students as champions of disaster preparedness and emergency response: Mock disaster drills have been completed involving the students of schools in which a good number of students were girls. Disaster drills allowed students, especially girls, to learn the basics of disaster preparedness – such as heightening the plinths of houses; preserving seeds for cultivation after the disasters; knowing the safe places for taking shelter; knowing how to disseminate early warnings; and helping people, especially children, pregnant women and elderly women, to take shelter in a safe place. Risk reduction study circles involving students was another effective initiative which engaged girls in extra-curricular activities. Students had the opportunity to study different materials to expand their knowledge, and to play games on disaster risk reduction and impacts, adaptation and mitigation regarding climate change.

Working against violence: PVA with girls and women identified how they are particularly vulnerable to violence in times of disaster. Following a natural disaster, many parents lose their livelihoods, which puts huge pressure on the community. As a result, parents attempt to arrange early marriage for young girls, while bad roads and poor communications means that students, particularly girls, face difficulty in going to schools, and eve teasing (public sexual harassment) increases. Male members of the community migrate in search of work and seek refuge in cities, leaving women with the sole responsibility of looking after the children, the elderly and household activities. Many women also become the victims of trafficking during this time.

## **A school-based approach to community empowerment: a sustainable solution**

There are numerous community empowerment programmes related to disaster preparedness and mitigation and many of those have achieved their objectives. However, the problem is that most of them are short-term, and issues of sustainability in these efforts are rarely addressed. Such initiatives usually diminish as the years pass and often come to an end when support from external sources is withdrawn. In most cases top-down and command-and-control approaches are used to manage disaster preparedness and emergency response efforts. With decisions made by higher authorities, they usually fail to meet the appropriate and vital humanitarian needs, based as they are on a perception of needs, which often has little relevance to local context and reality.

Educating students, who are the future leaders of their community, is a vital move toward developing community resilience to natural disasters. In DRRS project areas mock disaster drills have been practiced in schools, producing optimistic results as those connected to schools – students, teachers, and school management committee members – played vital roles, from disseminating early warnings to escorting people to safe shelters. Disaster drills and PVA have been designed using a rights-based approach, which takes into consideration that those who suffer the most are the poor who have limited survival resources, inadequate infrastructure and little if any access to social services. Schools-based community empowerment for disaster risk management ensures the participation of poor people in risk analysis, mitigation planning, capacity building, and the implementation and development of monitoring systems. When a disaster hits, it is people at the community level who have more to lose because they are the ones directly hit by the disaster, whether major or minor. As well as being the first to become vulnerable to the effects of such hazardous events, they also have the most to gain by reducing the impact of disasters on their community. These insights gave rise to the idea of community-based disaster management where communities are put at the forefront.

## Identifying gender needs and concerns and addressing them accordingly

The DRRS project has considered the gender equality framework in its financial and programmatic plans, works and implementation levels. As far as project participants are concerned, DRRS has always facilitated the space for the qualitative participation of girls and women, who are more vulnerable because of their subordinate position in the family arising out of patriarchy and traditionally embedded cultural values. Natural disasters – particularly cyclones; river erosion and other forms of soil degradation; water pollution; flooding; loss of wetlands; drought; and desertification – have direct impact on women in their roles as providers of food, water and fuel. The prevailing inequality in society's power relations – particularly with regard to regarding enjoying human rights; socioeconomic and political status; and access to and control over resources – has put women into more susceptible positions. As such, the DRRS project believes that the following factors have to be addressed to enable the development of women:

- access to socio-economic resources and ownership of productive assets
- bargaining power
- role in household economic decision making
- economic contribution of women to household welfare
- meeting basic needs and improving self-reliance
- reducing women's economic subordination.

## Taking critical gender issues into consideration

Keeping all these issues in mind, ensuring gender equality in disaster risk reduction efforts requires some critical aspects to be analysed, including:

- the level of qualitative participation of women in all disaster reduction components
- how disaster risk reduction decisions are taken in a community, and by whom
- factors behind gender inequality and how this increases the exposure and vulnerability of women to natural hazards
- identifying the elements required to ensure the sustainability of gender balance in disaster risk reduction initiatives
- identifying pivotal steps for empowering women with regards to disaster and vulnerability reduction.

Women and girls are participating alongside the men in analysing their own vulnerability and taking steps to reduce them. In total, 87 school-based PVAs have been completed, taking into consideration the views and opinions of three levels of the community – students, teachers and school management

committees. Schools and communities now have their own action plans for reducing vulnerability, including actions such as elevating the embankments around Char Bangla to protect the area from the risks of tidal surge.

## **Lessons learned**

The very idea of disaster preparedness for communities, and particularly for women and children, is reliably replicable in other areas of the country or even internationally where such disaster risk reduction projects are in operation. It sets an example that shows how a community can develop their resilience to natural disaster by educating and engaging its most vulnerable members in disaster preparedness. It also proves that even a disadvantaged community can get organised with regard to disaster preparedness if they are properly mobilised and there are meaningful spaces for women and men to participate equally, joining their hands together.

The initiative illustrates that women and girls are an active force in the community who have enormous potential to contribute to the community in terms of disaster risk reduction despite the fact that their roles are not traditionally valued and recognised by society. It also proves that all community members – irrespective of whether they are women or men – can play a vigilant role in making a community resilient to natural disasters, and can save the community during an emergency. The DRRS project is working to reduce disaster risk by enabling and engaging schools in the process. The success of this approach has validated the usefulness of PVA, which has proved successful in producing groups of capable and responsive people at the community level. The initiative can be replicated in different contexts because the basic need for disaster preparedness is common everywhere, and can increase the responsiveness of the youth of any community. This work also has the potential to make governance systems work more effectively from the local level upwards, rooted in the collective activism of both men and women.

## Biography:



**Khandaker Lutful Khaled**  
Deputy Manager, Education and Disaster Risk  
Reduction through Schools, ActionAid  
Bangladesh

[lutful.khaled@actionaid.org](mailto:lutful.khaled@actionaid.org)

I have been at ActionAid Bangladesh for three years. The things I value most in my job are working with poor and marginalised people and doing so through a rights-based approach. I truly believe in the spirit of collectivism. Together we can get things done if we have courage of conviction. The three things that drive me are working out: the strategy ActionAid should adopt to mobilise an active agency of people in the community who are able to claim their rights themselves; the ideal interface between community and state that places people at the centre of development endeavours; and the best strategy to ensure an inclusive society where women enjoy their rights and full benefit from the society.

# *Shuvadra wants to be a doctor, not a victim of early marriage*

**By Kakoli Rani Das**

## **Summary:**

*Shuvadra, a young girl from the low-caste Rishis community in Bangladesh, dreams of becoming a doctor – a dream that, not too long ago, would have been impossible. But since her mother joined a Reflect circle, things have changed. Local women have found their voice in the community and in their families, and the men have started to listen to them. Shuvadra's mother now thinks her youngest daughter should complete school and is determined to stop the harmful practices of dowry and early marriage. In their Reflect circles, Rishis women learn to understand their rights, analyse and resolve their problems, and to read and write. With these newly acquired skills, the women are standing up in their community and have planned actions that will help ensure a brighter future for girls like Shuvadra.*

## **Introduction**

Satkhira is one of the districts in the coastal belt of Bangladesh. It is very difficult to find a woman with good health in the Rishis community in Tala, Satkhira. Young girls are given away in early marriage. Such marriage leads to various kinds of physical and social difficulties. It reduces any decision-making power the women may have within the family. Low food intake, poor nutrition and immature child-rearing hugely affect the young mothers. The Rishis community are known as an 'untouchable' – or *dalit* – community in this country. Historically, within the Hindu caste system, they are one of the lowest castes. As a result, the people of the Rishis community are the poorest of the poor in the locality. Women and adolescent girls are the most affected and vulnerable social group in this community. This is because, as a strategy for dealing with the different vulnerabilities, their guardians arrange early marriage for young girls so that they can give a low dowry.

## **A story from the Rishis community**

Shuvadra Das is a ten-year-old girl from the Rishis community. She is studying in class three in the nearby government primary school. She is aware of the situation of women and adolescent girls in the community and is afraid for her future. There is a very high rate of early marriage or child marriage in her

community, a fact that women pay for heavily throughout their lives, due to the physical and social difficulties imposed by early marriage. Male members of their family take all the decisions and are more powerful than the women. Women cannot participate in the decision-making process of their own family and community. They even cannot give any opinion to stop early marriage.

Shuvadra's father's name is Shibupada Das. He is a carpenter. Her mother Aloka Rani Das is a housewife. Shuvadra has two older sisters and one brother. Her eldest sister Shakali got married five years ago to an illiterate man when she was only fourteen. At the time, she was studying in class eight. She has a three-year-old child and suffers from various kinds of diseases. Shuvadra's older sister Shuporna is supposed to be studying class four. However, she has been suffering from goitre for the last three years so she stopped studying. She felt shy and faced embarrassing situations in school due to her disease.

Discrimination between girls and boys is very high in this community. Shuvadra's only brother is preparing to sit in the secondary school certificate examination this year. He got the opportunity to continue his studies and secure a better future for himself. Shuvadra also wants this kind of opportunity to continue her studies and wants to be a doctor. While she is at school, Shuvadra can forget all her difficulties. However, she knows that as a girl of this community, it is very difficult to continue her studies. She also knows that her parents will arrange marriage for her sometime between the ages of 12 and 16. Shuvadra has a silent question in her eyes always – will she be able to continue her studies and be a doctor? Or will she become a victim of early marriage like her elder sister Shakali?



## Domestic violence

Many of girls in the community face domestic violence for not fulfilling the demands for dowry. Since the Rishis community follows the Hindu marriage system, there is no written record and no divorce option. So Rishis women have to adjust to live with their husband's family, whatever problems they face there. In almost every case, they are financially dependent on their husband and other male family members. Their father's family does not accept them positively if they go back to them. Furthermore, Hindu girls have no right to their father's property, so they have to tolerate all the violence just to survive in their husband's house.



## Health

The women's health is seriously affected by early marriage. They can get health services from the Government Upazila Health Complex, but it is far from their community. Government health facilitators do not come to their community and do not provide them any means of birth control and other health services. As a result, the rate of population increase is very high. Most pregnant women do not get antenatal, childbirth or postnatal care. As a result they suffer from different pregnancy-related problems, made all the more difficult by their young age.

## Investment in girls

As the Rishis are from a very low caste they have to live in the remote, low-lying areas of the locality and their land floods during the wet season - they stay under water for six months of the year. Water logging increases their vulnerability: most people cannot go outside to earn a living during this period, so they cannot afford food, education and other expenses for their children. Girls are especially affected as their parents are not interested in investing in the girls because they have to depend financially and socially on their boys in future. They also have to save dowry money as their daughter grows up. So they do not like to spend more on a girl's education and do not want to bring them up for a long time. Another important reason is that they do not regard their girls as their future heirs – in fact, they do not treat them as human beings.

## What ActionAid Bangladesh is doing

ActionAid Bangladesh has initiated *Reflect* circles within the Rishis community. A Reflect circle is a group of women who work for their own empowerment, to ensure their rights and solve their problems individually and collectively by their own actions. ActionAid Bangladesh works with a local partner organisation called Bhumija, whose aim is to ensure a dignified life for the so-called lower class community – especially for the women and adolescent girls.

## Reflect circles

Bhumija has formed some *Reflect* circles with the women of this community, who identify their own problems at meetings. They also discuss different issues that concern them, such as: early marriage; dowry; violence; education; health; lack of income-generating activities; and isolation from other communities. The women have also initiated different interventions with school teachers, social, political and religious leaders, local government officials and others. They want to sensitise the whole community, make the government aware of the issues that affect them and take affirmative action to ensure their rights and to stop early marriage, dowry, and violence against women in the community.

Shuvadra's mother is one of the participants of the *Reflect* circles. The women usually share their circle experience with their family members. There are also spouse forums, which meet once a month, where the men give their opinion on different topics and discuss the issues already discussed by the women in the *Reflect* circles. These



discussions have motivated the spouses to become more aware, and give the circle's women participants' space to contribute in their family decision-making process. Circle participants think it would be very helpful to make a happy and planned family, as it would help reduce the high percentage of early marriage and high population growth. It will also help to protect women and adolescent girls from poor health conditions and various diseases. They think that all these initiatives will lead Shuvadra's dream to come true. She could be able to complete her studies and fulfil her dream of becoming a doctor, not a victim of early marriage.

## Changes in Reflect circles

Shuvadra's mother came to realise the ill effects of early marriage and dowry after getting involved in the *Reflect* circles. She is now determined to give Shuvadra a proper education, will not arrange her marriage at an early age and will not give any dowry. Through *Reflect*, this community is slowly but steadily realising the causes of their problems and identifying probable measures to combat these problems. They also learn to read and write in their circles, as most of them are illiterate. The women can now sometimes participate in their family's decision-making process, and have a say to stop their children's marriage. Male family members show some respect for their wives and other women family members as they are becoming literate and have started to involve themselves in different income-generating activities. The young girls become more confident to continue their studies as their parents particularly their mothers encourage them to continue their studies. They get better treatment from their teachers and school friends, which they did not get before because they are from the Rishis community. They are also more aware of the effect of early marriage and dowry.

Bhumija also initiated different meetings between the community and government officials, political, religious and local community leaders, and others. The main objective of the meetings is to reduce the discrimination towards Rishis community. As a result, members of the Rishis community can

now enter different shops, sit together with the other community people, and use their dishes. Sometimes they can participate in religious programmes organised by the other communities, which would in the past have been impossible.

## Conclusion

ActionAid Bangladesh has only just started working in this community; however, the circle participants feel that they are beginning to take part in their family's decision-making process, which would previously have been unbelievable. Parents have become motivated enough not to stop their daughters' education. However still they – the men in particular – are not yet motivated enough to stop the practices of dowry and early marriage, and domestic violence continues. The Reflect circles have identified the obstacles to stopping early marriages in their community, and have planned for actions with the adolescent girls and other (especially male) family members, school teachers, local community leaders, government officials and others. They are hopeful enough that these activities will lead them to stop the early marriage system in their community as soon as possible.

## Biography:



### **Kakoli Rani Das**

**Programme Officer, Reflect Development Unit,  
Impact Assessment & Shared Learning, ActionAid  
Bangladesh**

**[kakoli.das@actionaid.org](mailto:kakoli.das@actionaid.org)**

My core responsibility is knowledge management within ActionAid Bangladesh's Reflect development unit. I am responsible for: research and concept notes; drawing up agreements between ActionAid Bangladesh and our partner organisations and networks; facilitating capacity-building activities; and providing technical support to partner organisations and lokokendras (poor people's organisations).

I am inspired by ActionAid's mission, vision, values and its women-friendly environment, as well as the vulnerable position and condition of the women we work with, and their determination to escape these vulnerabilities. I am happy to be able to use my communication and facilitation skills and my understanding of development issues to help them do this.

# **Adolescent family life education: reducing violence against girls**

**By Lubna Ferdowsi**

## **Summary:**

*Violence against girls is an everyday occurrence in Bangladesh today. It is ingrained in our society and takes place everywhere – even in schools, which should be havens of learning, where children learn tolerance and respect for human rights. ActionAid Bangladesh's adolescent family life education (AFLE) programme has been working with young people and teachers for two years. Through a mixture of training for teachers, raising awareness among adolescents and creating opportunities for young people, we have come a long way towards addressing the issue of violence against girls in school, with visible results including reduced dropout rates among girls and stamping out negatively gendered views among both girls and boys. We have shown that AFLE can be effective in reducing violence against girls and can help young people take part in society as an effective force for social change. Our vision is to replicate the process throughout the country and make AFLE part of the national curriculum thus ensuring that the comprehensive development of adolescents becomes part of mainstream education and an end to violence against girls.*

## **Introduction**

One of the objects of ActionAid Bangladesh's AFLE (adolescent family life education) programme is to reduce violence against girls. If we look at our society, we find that violence against women and children is a range of behaviour and attitudes towards them that thwarts their interests, mobility and active participation. This affects them physically, mentally and sexually, and harms their dignity, physical and psychological development or socio-cultural status. A severe form of violence in the community that goes unreported is 'eve teasing' towards adolescent girls. Eve teasing – a form of public sexual aggression that ranges from sexually suggestive remarks and catcalls to 'inadvertent' brushing up and outright groping – is a widespread problem in Bangladesh and can lead to suicide, school dropouts, early marriage and other serious problems. The violence takes place in different ways in the grounds of institutions and on the street, challenging the sense of security for girls and

women. This violence also takes place with the knowledge of the community, and school teachers in particular – the duty bearers who should protect the rights of the girls.

## **How gender violence is currently reinforced in schools**

Girls face prejudiced behaviour and attitudes not only at home but also in the community, in places such as schools. A school should be a safe place for learning and an opportunity to instil tolerance and respect for human rights. When the school system becomes discriminatory, and an environment is created for gender violence, it is important that institutions and governments respond properly. A failure to deal with the issue of gender violence (both of sexual and non-sexual kinds) in the school and its environment reinforces and legitimises violence against women, and gives reign to gender inequality in general. A school environment where sexually violent behaviour, harassment and unfairness are tolerated compromises the right of learners to enjoy education on equal terms and constitutes an experience that is damaging to all children.

When a teacher shows preference for male pupils for headship roles, limits girls' entrance to higher status knowledge, espouses insensitive but different disciplinary actions on boys and girls, imposes severe policing of girls' sexuality, overlooks or charges girls for sexual harassment, or permits boys to control classroom verbal communication and physical space, this forces girls to restrict and limit their self-expression. And when the sexual harassment of girls is reinforced by graffiti on walls and similar expressions of abuse against women and girls, it normalises a culture of inequality and violence against women which young boys and girls learn to accept as a way of life.

Bangladesh is a society where patriarchy dominates and its power is maintained through practices that promote discourse that build prejudice against women and girls. This discourse of discrimination has penetrated into the way knowledge is spread and is evident in places like formal educational institutions. Consequently, gender violence, particularly of the sexual kind, in the education sector is a problem that remains unaddressed. Sexual brutality and persecution violate women's and girls' human rights, damages their physical and psychological health and severely restricts their ability to achieve their educational potential.

Does our culture fear gender violence against girls so much that it is prepared to trade off girls' education, aspirations and potentials in exchange for safety and reputation?

## **Working with adolescents and teachers to raise awareness of gender violence in schools**

ActionAid Bangladesh has looked at ways to address the situations described above and has taken various initiatives at national, institutional and grassroots levels. In keeping with ActionAid International's campaign against violence in girls' education, ActionAid Bangladesh has initiated the adolescent-friendly institution-building programme as one of its strategies.

During the last two years (2006-2008), ActionAid Bangladesh's Creating Adolescents Opportunity theme conducted training teachers and head teachers of high schools in seven areas of the country. This training aimed to develop school teachers' conceptual understanding of AFLE, making them aware of gender issues including the vulnerability of adolescents and how sexual prejudice promotes violence and consequently ends up derailing both adolescent boys and girls. The training also looks at the roles of teachers and other responsible groups in preventing those problems.

### **The following activities have taken place under the AFLE programme:**

- school forum activities in various non-government poor schools
- information boxes supplied in those schools to enable adolescent students, especially girls, to share their difficulties easily – these boxes are symbols of freedom of opinion, as students can anonymously share their views, concerns and problems on any matter by writing them down and posting them into the box
- recommending that schools provide a student counsellor or advisor service to help girls and boys share and solve their personal problems very frankly
- recommending regular co-curricular activities such as debates, impromptu speeches, quiz competitions, and ongoing storytelling competitions that address the various issues affecting adolescents – especially violence against girls – with the aim of raising awareness of the serious implications in society.

In 2008 the Creating Adolescents Opportunity theme conducted refresher training for 280 teachers from 93 schools (two teachers and one head teacher per school) from seven different regions of the country – Khulna, Rajshahi, Dhaka, Comilla, Rangamati, Banshkhali and Manikgonj. This training was guided by findings of the thematic study *Gendered violence in education: realities for adolescent girls in Bangladesh*. The objectives of the study were to explore the extent to which “gendered violence faced by adolescent girls has a major impact in education” and to examine some of the solutions, ranging from national legislation to dealing with the issue within institutions. The teacher training was directed at giving the teachers the tools to enable them to raise their students' awareness about such issues and motivate them to spread their concern in their families and the wider community.

## Positive results

In 2008 we conducted field visits to assess the impact of the school programme. We found that the attitude of the school teachers had changed a little and that they were showing a positive approach to continuing the sessions and meeting the needs of adolescent students. Adolescent girls felt free to share their personal problems with the student advisor, and most of the schools had set up an information box. School environments had also improved, with separate toilets established for male and female students. Some of the school forums had arranged various street dramas to raise awareness on the issues of violence against girls in the community, while others had staged protests about violence against girls and eve teasing.

We have observed that providing training for high school teachers on AFLE and gender issues has helped reduce dropout rates among adolescent girls and to stamp out negatively gendered views among both boys and girls. At the beginning teachers and students felt equally hesitant to discuss issues of sexual hostility and reproductive health, due to a perception that those issues are personal in nature and cannot be discussed explicitly. However, by the end of the year a positive attitude had been established between teachers and students, so that they were able to share these matters easily and more unreservedly.

Now we can see the achievement: teachers are more aware of gender-based violence in schools and they address AFLE issues with their students for them to practice in their social and family lives. From this point of view we can share a successful case study:

*Arifa Khatun, is the only girl in her family who goes to school. Her father, Md.*



**Arifa again goes to school**

*Azizul Hoque is a day labourer. They live in the Miapur village of Charghat Upazilla in Rajshahi. She has two sisters and one brother. Her brother is the youngest child. Neither of her sisters goes to school any more. Arifa is in class nine in Karbala high school, ½ km away from Miapur village. When her friends at the adolescents' forum, which was formed as part of the adolescent-friendly institution-building programme, found out that Arifa was going to get married, they discussed the problem with the forum's focal teacher and a staff member of TDC (ActionAid Bangladesh's partner organisation), so that they could jointly intervene to stop the marriage.*

*When the teacher and forum members spoke to Arifa's parents, they refused to stop the marriage and tried instead to arrange the ceremony as fast as they could. At the same time forum members talked to Arifa about what she wanted to do, and she told them that she was very keen to continue studying, so the forum members took the matter to the ward commissioner of Charghat Union. The commissioner told them to inform the Upazilla Nirbahi Office (the sub-divisional authority), which referred the matter back to the Charghat Thana (local-level police authority). With the assistance of the Thana, they collected Arifa's birth certificate and told her parents that, as Arifa was under age, they would take legal action if they forced her to marry. At last her parents stopped the marriage and Arifa was free to continue with her education.*

## Conclusion

Arifa Khatun's case provides a positive illustration of how the programmes that are in place to address AFLE can be effective in reducing violence against girls in our society and can help adolescent students to take part in society as an effective force for social change. If we sustain it appropriately in every arena in our country, it can be a good programme to stop violence against girls. In this regard there is a need for a countrywide in-depth study about incorporating family life education as part of the curriculum. This would enable policymakers to incorporate AFLE in our national curriculum.

## Biography:



### Lubna Ferdowsi

Associate Program Officer, Creating Adolescents Opportunity Theme, ActionAid Bangladesh

[lubna.ferdowsi@actionaid.org](mailto:lubna.ferdowsi@actionaid.org)

I have been working in ActionAid Bangladesh's women's rights and gender equality department for one and a half years now. My main responsibilities include contributing to partnership management; maintaining documentation on thematic activities; and organising training sessions, workshops and conferences. In my work I am accountable to the mainstream AFLE programme under the violence against girls' campaign. I am committed to my work, and am particularly inspired to seek out women's and girl's interests from a feminist point of view. I enjoy using my skills to analyse issues from a gender and development perspective, organise an enlightening programme on gender, adolescents and youth and facilitate training to this end.



# **Positive steps on the road to establishing occupational health rights in Bangladesh**

**By Munni Hoque**

## **Summary:**

***According to the International Labour Organization, 11 700 workers suffer fatal accidents in Bangladesh each year. A further 24,500 die from occupational diseases, while 8 million suffer injuries at work, many of which result in permanent disability. Although there are many laws governing workers' welfare, these are rarely implemented, particularly when it comes to women. Through its occupational health rights programme, ActionAid Bangladesh works at all levels with workers, communities, industry managers and policymakers – to raise awareness of the issues, increase workers' capacity to claim their rights and promote the idea of corporate social responsibility. At the same time they run other programmes – such as education for workers' children, health and safety training and daycare provision – to gain the trust of industry management and access to factories. This overview of occupational health in Bangladesh shows that the sector is still in its early stage of development. As the economy undergoes rapid industrialisation, it is time it took centre stage.***

## **Introduction**

Occupational health as a concept is very new in Bangladesh. Each occupation and working environment has a certain kind of health risk which directly influences the productivity of the workers and has an indirect effect on the industry's overall performance. It is an essential part of worker welfare. Occupational health is a multidisciplinary approach to the recognition, diagnosis, treatment, prevention and control of work-related diseases, injuries and other conditions, including workplace environment. The World Health Organization/International Labour Organization (WHO/ILO) Joint Committee on Occupational Health defined it as the "promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations." The protection of workers' health is closely related to equity issues. But, as in many developing countries, this area is still neglected in Bangladesh and it is difficult to recognise a clear demarcation between occupational healthcare and general medical care. The Bangladesh government

recognises that millions of workers in many sectors are subject to unacceptable health and safety conditions that place their lives at considerable risk. Employers and workers lack awareness about law and enforcement and the nature of risk, and there is inadequate research into practical solutions that will improve working practice. As a result, workers are exposed adversely to different substances and chemicals. A greater emphasis must also be placed on the employer's responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace for its employees. So to take necessary steps to improve the health status of workers and ensure their health rights requires a concentrated and integrated effort, which are currently lacking.

## **Background and ActionAid Bangladesh's reasons for working on this issue**

Improving the conditions of workers is very important because they are the saviour of the society; the country's socio-economic development depends on improving the productivity of workers, which can only happen if industrial sectors ensure their occupational health rights. Meeting the needs of workers is a precondition for sustainable development of the economy and for poverty reduction. A favourable environment, adequate health facilities and reducing the risk of occupational health hazards and accidents are important determinant factors for worker satisfaction in different occupational sectors.

However, occupational health hazards associated with the workplace environment are commonplace Bangladesh. Social compliance is not properly addressed and workers experience death, injury, persistent insecurity and other forms of abuse. Occupational health hazards have a variety of causes, including: absent or insufficient safety measures; an unhygienic environment; unplanned physical infrastructures; a lack of care support systems within and outside industry; non-compliance with water and sanitation requirements; the use of hazardous substances in production processes; and using unskilled labour.

Moreover, the existing economic, legal, and medical systems are not able to respond adequately. Victims' voices are not being heard – the lack of no job security, social security or any other security continues. Effective controlling mechanisms are also absent, so the number of occupational health hazard victims are increasing at an alarming rate. The ILO estimates that each year in Bangladesh 11,700 workers suffer fatal accidents and a further 24,500 die from occupational diseases.<sup>11</sup> It also estimates that a further 8 million workers suffer injuries at work – many of which will result in permanent disability.

---

<sup>11</sup> OSHE-Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health & Environment Foundation, National occupational health and safety policy for Bangladesh, 2007

Occupational diseases also have many different causes. Various studies have found that in different industries, unseen and microscopic particles – such as dust, jute and cotton fibres and volatile chemicals – are floating around, exposing workers, who spend long periods in these unhealthy environments without protection or preventive measures – to different types of diseases. Respiratory illnesses, skin disease, hepatitis, urinal infections, peptic ulcers, and hearing problems are the most common.

Despite this scenario, the ready-made garments sector is playing a crucial role in reducing unemployment and contributes greatly in our economy, earning US\$9.2 billion in exports in 2006-07. The sector's total export contribution was approximately 76% and its average annual growth rate is 18%. According to previous records, about 1.5 million people work in this sector; 90% of them women. For different reasons, the health status of women workers is neglected and faces many obstacles. Following the advent of the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh, women's migration from rural to urban areas has increased during the last few decades. Migrant women are preferred because they offer cheaper labour. Women provide a flexible supply of labour and for comparatively lower pay than their male counterparts, and they work for long hours both at home and in the workplace. Women mostly experience a relatively deprived workplace and violence against women recently emerged as another dimension of their mistreatment within the workplace. Women workers are frequently victims of physical or mental abuse by their male colleagues or supervisor. Violence against women remains largely unreported – mainly due to the insecurity of victims, lengthy legal procedures that discourage people from seeking legal support, and prevailing norms and values regarding women's honour – making women everyday targets of discrimination, exploitation and violence. During the period of legal litigation women get neither legal protection of their choice, nor financial support to save them and their family members from starvation.

As in many other developing countries, occupational health is a neglected area in Bangladesh. Very few industry managements are concerned about the workplace environment or compliance. But to ensure sustainable economic and social development, compliance should be ensured in all industries. There lies the importance of corporate social responsibility. In the new millennium, corporate social responsibility approaches has been highly appreciated around the world for ensuring the occupational health and workplace environment in the industrial sector.

Corporate social responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the

quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the community and society at large.<sup>12</sup> In responsible business practice, stakeholders' engagement plays a significant role in gaining credibility and legitimacy of intervention. Economic performance is not the only responsibility of a business organisation; rather, in the words of Peter Drucker, business "must assume responsibility for its impact on employees, the environment, customers and whomever and whatever it touches."<sup>13</sup>

ActionAid Bangladesh aims to improve the health, social security and physical living conditions of poor and socially disadvantaged people. In 2006 we initiated a programme promoting corporate social responsibility on occupational health rights in partnership with Population Services & Training Center (PSTC), a national-level organisation in Bangladesh. The programme was initiated in Gazipur district, 40 kilometres from Dhaka. The area is a growing industrial zone where more than 200 industrial set-ups are operating with more than 100,000 workers and without adequate facilities and working conditions. These include a lack of: adequate dining facilities; proper water and sanitation facilities; transportation; acceptable working hours; weekly rest day; paid maternity leave; childcare centres; and other requirements of responsible business practice. A distinctive feature of these industries is that women make up 80% of the workforce. The issue of working women's rights – particularly the rights of mother and child; the right to mother's milk; safety and security; rest and recreation – need urgent attention.

## Strategies

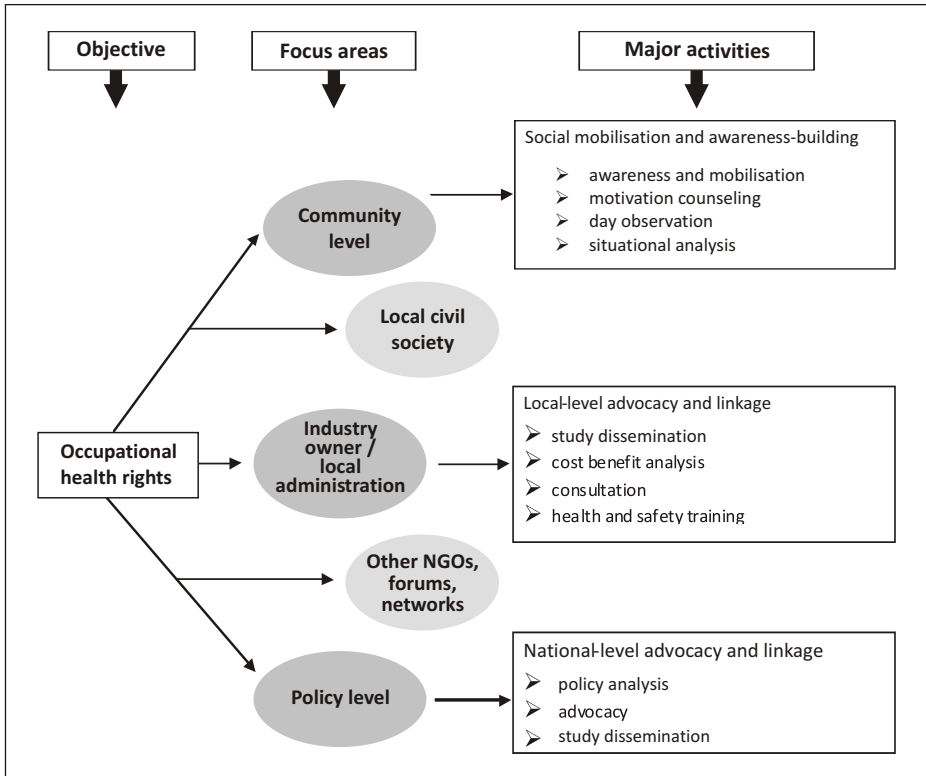
ActionAid Bangladesh's occupational health rights programme is working to establish the health rights of workers in all levels of occupations. The major objective of the programme is to improve the workplace environment of factories and industries by increasing corporate social responsibility. To achieve its objectives the programme is working at different levels with different strategies. These are: to convince factory owners and management that the provision of a healthy environment and health services at the workplace will not only improve production but profit as well; forming advocacy groups to increase responsiveness; mobilising workers to make them aware of the workplace environment and personal hygiene; and claiming rights to health and safety.

---

<sup>12</sup> World Business Council for Sustainable Development, Making Good Business Sense, 2000 - <http://www.wbcsd.org/web/publications/csr2000.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Drucker, P, 2004 quoted in [http://www.asianhnm.com/healthcare\\_management/corporate\\_privatehospitals.htm](http://www.asianhnm.com/healthcare_management/corporate_privatehospitals.htm)

## Operational structure of the programme



## Strategies for national-level advocacy and linkages

Policy advocacy is required to ensure the formulation, reformulation and implementation of an occupational health and safety policy, along with interventions in community and local level. There are different tools and techniques to make occupational health and safety-related issues visible for policymakers and people at large – for example, video documentaries on different occupational sectors; TV spots on occupational health; and publishing articles in the dailies through journalist fellowships. Study and situational analysis findings are disseminated through national-level seminars and workshops to make the issue vibrant and build national alliance and advocacy groups with like-minded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), forums, networks, labour organisations and other civil society institutions to create policy pressure.

ActionAid Bangladesh has developed a common platform with like-minded national-level NGOs to take forward the issues of workers' rights. Communications materials – such as documentaries and popular versions of existing laws for workers rights developed by the programme were highly appreciated and in demand by trade union organisations and other stakeholders. The programme also developed awareness among the public and policymakers about world occupational health and safety day through a 30-second TV spot broadcast on different TV channels, and raised awareness by demonstrating and participating in the Shromo Mela (labour fair on 1 May) organised by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Bangladesh.

## **Strategies for local-level advocacy and linkages**

One of the programme's major objectives is to increase the responsiveness of factory owners and management in establishing congenial working environments, including the provision of health services for workers. As such, industry management is a major area of focus for intervention. Regulatory bodies or local-level factory inspection bodies can also play an effective role in activating the health and safety system within industry and in bridging the relationship between industry management and workers within the local community including workers their family members and others in the neighbourhood. We also use other tools and techniques such as issue-specific workshops, sharing findings of analysis, consensus building workshops, and bilateral or group consultations to support our advocacy works and build relationships with different stakeholders

## **Social mobilisation and awareness-building at the community level**

One of the programme's strategies is to build awareness and ensure social mobilisation among the community, including factory workers, who are often unaware of existing laws and workplace environment and hygiene practices. The programme uses different tools and techniques to raise awareness among workers.

As the programme is supported by child sponsorship funds, sponsored children and their surroundings must be addressed through different activities. Adult literacy and social mobilisation takes place through occupational health rights forums (consisting of members of different occupational groups who are related to sponsored children), Reflect circles and *lokokendra* (people's rights-based organisations). The programme also raises awareness on occupational health rights through: a local dance team; adolescent reproductive health

By gaining the confidence of factory management, the programme has been given access to 25 factories within the working area, including 10 operating in the ready-made garments sector. We ran workshops on health and safety training in a garments factory, where workers became aware of issues regarding health and safety inside and outside the factories. The programme has also increased awareness among sections of people in the working area regarding different occupational hazards that may affect them. The programme has secured access to public service facilities for community-level programme participants by strengthening the relationship between the community and local administrative bodies. There is also increased awareness among school students regarding the occupational health hazards particularly reproductive health hazards for adolescents and factory workers.

education; safe birth and mother care through trained traditional birth attendants; and shishu bikash *kendras* (early childhood development and childhood development centres).

## Challenges

Factory management in Bangladesh is naturally reluctant to work with NGOs for two reasons: negative allegations against some of the NGOs who work for worker's rights and the fact that the occupational health issue is not very well known, so people often confuse the issue with economic rights such as wages and overtime. Clarifying such misconceptions to factory management and programme participants remains a big challenge, and has resulted in delays with getting access to the factories.

The country's unstable political situation during the last few years has also significantly influenced programme activities. Following unrest in the ready-made garments sector, NGOs working for workers' rights were accused of promoting anarchy, and government ministries and officials were not very interested in paying attention to these kinds of issues. As a result, it took a long time to identify the strategic initiatives to run the programme and in some cases the programme was rescheduled to continue for longer.

## Future direction

We have identified a number of programmes to ensure the future sustainability of the occupational health rights programme, and others need to be identified. While Ojufa's case (see box on p7) cannot be taken as an indicator of the success of the overall programme, it clearly indicates that the programme must focus more on the issues of worker rights violations in relation to health,

## Occupational health forum establishes rights for working mothers

Ojufa, 25, lives in the village of Vaoraid in Kaulta Union. She works in a spinning mill where her husband is caretaker.

ActionAid Bangladesh initiated an occupational health rights forum after completing a *Reflect* circle with community members, including workers. Various issues were discussed in the forum to mobilise and raise worker awareness about their rights.

Ojufa was one of the regular members of the forum. When she became

pregnant she was worried about maternity leave and benefits. She shared her worries with the forum facilitator and immediately forum members came to solve her problem, discussing the issue with factory management. At first they had no success, but Ojufa claimed her rights by referring to a 2006 labour law she had learned about from the forum. Finally factory management realised their misunderstanding and approved three months' maternity leave with full pay and festival bonus.

According to the Labour Act of 2006, working women are entitled to 112 days' maternity leave on full pay, but many industries violate these rights due to a lack of information about labour law and rights, and owners' responsibility towards workers.



occupational health and other social issues to improve their lives. The programme also needs to identify the root causes of rights violations and take action to address those cases. Ojufa's case shows that existing laws are not being implemented within industry; the big challenge for the programme therefore lies in addressing the duty bearers' responsibilities to the rights holders. We also need to increase campaigning and awareness-raising activities, as familiarity with the issues is low. The media can be an effective tool in this regard. Access to the factories can be facilitated by first gaining the trust of industry management through other programmes such as: education for workers' children; health and safety training for workers; and daycare facilities for working mothers.



There is a need to develop separate occupational health and safety strategies and policies, and to involve stakeholders from all levels – grassroots workers to national-level policymakers who are already working on the issues – in the process. Corporate social responsibility issues need to be highlighted and addressed, following the beginnings of a shift in business ethics from being purely profit-driven to bringing in a focus to people and planet.<sup>14</sup> In this definition from Lotus Holdings, a Nepali company that supports and promotes ethical business, planet refers to the environmental concerns related to the business and their stakeholders; while people refers to all those related to the business – employees, buyers, consumers, their family members, shareholders and ultimately, the whole human race; profit needs no explanation. The internal and external dimensions of corporate social responsibility include: human resource management; health and safety at work; internal health and safety management; local communities, business, partners, suppliers and consumers; and human rights. But most organisations do not practice corporate social responsibility due to a lack of accountability and proper knowledge on modern business ethics, together with ineffective and dysfunctional law enforcement agencies. So the programme has the great responsibility to raise awareness among factory management of responsible business practice.

## Conclusion

Occupational health issues are diverse and multidimensional. In Bangladesh, the sector is still in its developmental stage, but as the economy undergoes rapid industrialisation, it is vital that occupational health takes centre stage. The government must take immediate action to improve the occupational safety and health conditions of workers by: ratifying ILO conventions on occupational health and safety; formulating national occupational health and safety policy; and implementing and upgrading existing laws. Training, awareness and motivation for employers and workers regarding work-place health and safety is also vital, while policymakers, legislators, employers and society at large need to understand that true social and economic development can be achieved through good practices of occupational health and safety.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Lotus Holdings website: <http://www.lotusholdings.com.np/index.php?page=message>

## Biography:



### **Munni Hoque**

**Programme Officer, Right to Quality Health,  
ActionAid Bangladesh**

**[munni.hoque@actionaid.org](mailto:munni.hoque@actionaid.org)**

I joined ActionAid Bangladesh in 2006, after year as an intern in on a joint UNDP/Ministry of Women and Children project on capacity building for gender mainstreaming. I have a masters degrees in economics and health economics, and my areas of expertise include health and health rights; occupational health; reproductive health and char health. As well as facilitating thematic activities and programme planning, I manage ActionAid Bangladesh's partners in the occupational health rights project in Gazipur. I also carry out and contribute to research. I like working with marginalised people, especially on the issue of women's rights and health rights. I particularly enjoy working with a wide cross-section of people and organisations.

# Changing lives with school material supplies

By Rajib Kundu

## Summary:

*In Satkhira district in southeast Bangladesh, 60% of people live below the poverty line. Many children drop out of school, either to help support their family or because they cannot afford basic school materials such as pencils, rulers and notebooks. ActionAid partner Uttaran has been working with local people in the area to help get children back to school. Community consultations revealed that parents could not afford to buy school materials, while children explained that they dropped out of school because they were ashamed not to have the most basic supplies. As a result, Uttaran distributed free educational materials and school drop-out rates were slashed in half.*

Children love to play, sing, draw and do a lot of fun activities at school, along with their studies. But poor countries like Bangladesh can barely provide proper educational support for children.



Satkhira is a coastal district in southeast Bangladesh where some 60% of the population lives below the poverty line. The poor inhabitants work hard to earn their livelihood, and all family members take part in income-earning activities, even children under the age of 16. The area has severe salinity problems which makes agricultural production difficult. Most people have turned from farmers into shrimp labourers, as saline waterlogging has made the land unusable for farming. This has meant a drastic change in local economic activity.

## Children lose interest in education

Most of the people of this area now rely on shrimp production, which has reduced their monthly income. Because shrimp farming is very labour-intensive, most parents have also engaged their children in this job: about 17% of children are fully engaged in direct income generation for their families while another 40% work part-time helping their parents. The lower income resulting from shrimp production also means that parents struggle to buy basic school supplies for their children. These changes resulted in:

- increased school drop-out rates
- irregular attendance at school
- children not enjoying school because they did not have the right equipment
- parents discouraged from sending children to school as they could not afford education materials



Uttaran, ActionAid's local partner organisation in the area, took this matter as a serious issue and started working with local people in Satkhira's Debhata sub-district to find a solution.

Amena (13) lives with her parents and two siblings in Sekendra village, Debhata sub-district. Her father Rezaul Islam (42) is a day labourer and her mother Fatima Begum (36) is a housewife. She says, *"A few years ago I was irregular at school. I did not have a pen, pencil, notebook or any books. My parents always wanted me to continue with school but they could not buy all these educational materials for me. So I became irregular at school and started helping my mother in her household tasks."*

## Finding a way out

After noticing the decreasing trend in school attendance, Uttaran tried to search for the root causes of this decline and started community consultation to find a solution.

Uttaran held four consultation meetings at community level with parents, teachers, children and community leaders. In total, around 150 people took part, discussing the importance of child education. Parents realised the value of education, but expressed their inability to buy all the materials their children



A community consultation meeting about how to ensure quality education for our children



Meeting with teachers about preventing drop-outs

need. The children explained that they felt sorry and hopeless without a pen, notebook, pencil or ruler.

Nur Islam (43) of Shakhipur village says, *“It was a shame for me that I could not buy educational materials for my daughter Shamima. I joined Uttaran's community consultation meeting and told the meeting that I wanted to continue with my daughter's education, but I needed some help to buy the costly materials.”*

Through the meetings the community decided that:



Amena at school

- parents would stop their children doing income-generation work
- parents would send their children back to school
- teachers would take more care of students, to prevent drop-outs
- Uttaran would provide free education materials to children, according to need.

Amena says, *“Together with my parents I joined the meeting and I spoke out about my problems of not having a pen, pencil and notebook. Then after a long discussion it was decided that we would get free education materials.”*



Amena studying at home with her grandmother

## Education materials delivered to the children

During 2006 and 2007, Uttaran enlisted a total of 2,080 students who had dropped out of school due to a lack of education materials. After finding out the type and number of materials needed, Uttaran provided a total of: 4, 500 exercise books; 4,160 wood pencils; 450 slates (local stone-made boards that children write on) and slate-pencils; 1,440 drawing notebooks; 7,460 ballpoint pens; 955 colour pencils; and 450 rulers.

The free supply of educational materials created huge interest among local children, who were happy to get new notebooks, slates, pens, pencils, colour pencils and rulers.

*“Distributing free education material among poor children is a very good step by Uttaran. I found many children are very happy now with the materials and they are coming to school with much more interest and inspiration!”* Sirazul Islam (46), head teacher of Sreepur Town primary school

## Children are now enjoying a better education

The poor families of Debhata understand the importance of education, but it was very difficult for them to arrange educational materials for their children. After Uttaran's distribution of free education materials, many poor families got back the hope of continuing their child's education. When Uttaran started working in the village in 2006, the drop-out rate was 40%. By the beginning of this year, it had fallen to 20% as parents are now encouraging and ensuring their children's school attendance.



A student receives his free slate

The children, happy to have school materials, now go to school regularly and enjoy their studies. Child labour has reduced by around 20%, and those children now attend school regularly.



Some happy children with their free materials at school

Amena continues, *“I got all my educational materials free from the uncles of Uttaran [she refers to staff as 'uncle']*. Since then, I go to school regularly and my parents also encourage me to study. I want to continue my studies

*and become a teacher some day. Thanks to Uttaran for helping me in my studies!”*

Uttaran has found that a little help to children can make a significant positive change in their lives. As a result, Uttaran has a plan to provide educational materials to more children in the Debhata sub-district.

## **Biography:**



### **Rajib Kundu**

**Sponsorship Officer, ActionAid Bangladesh**

**[rajib.kundu@actionaid.org](mailto:rajib.kundu@actionaid.org)**

Rajib Kundu is a computer engineer and has a masters degree in Population Sciences. Rajib loves to “work with poor children for their education.” He is a dreamer for a socialist world free of all inequalities. He loves music and painting.

# ActionAid Cyclone Sidr recovery programme benefits survivors, especially women

Shirin Akhter

## Summary:

*When Cyclone Sidr hit southern Bangladesh on 15 November 2007, it affected 8.9 million people, who lost or sustained damage to their homes, livelihoods, livestock or environment. In the immediate aftermath, ActionAid Bangladesh and its partners provided emergency relief, healthcare, psychosocial care and education support. Our recovery programme also focused on reconstructing homes, improving livelihoods and lobbying the government for land for the landless.*

*This review provides details of ActionAid Bangladesh's cyclone recovery programme, the impact of this work and the lessons learnt.*

## Introduction

When Cyclone Sidr hit the south of country on 15 November 2007, ActionAid Bangladesh supported the survivors with emergency relief, rehabilitation and recovery, reconstruction, livelihoods support and health and psychosocial care.

Cyclone Sidr affected 8.9 million people, most of whom either lost their dwellings or sustained significant damages to their homes, livelihoods, livestock and environment. ActionAid's recovery programme was focused in Khulna, Bagerhat, Barguna, Pirojpur and Patuakhali areas.



A woman in Barishal picks up what is left of her roof after cyclone Sidr

- 30 out of 64 districts were affected
- more than 3,400 people were killed and 55,000 injured
- more than 2 million families were affected in some way
- the financial cost of damages is in excess of £460 million



## Healthcare response

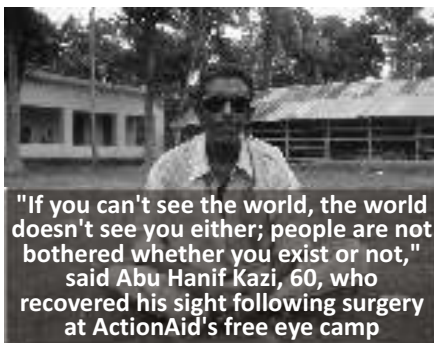
ActionAid Bangladesh organised 20 health camps and six eye camps across the Sidr-affected areas. Experienced general physicians and gynaecologists provided medical advice, referrals and treatment; while free medicines and wheelchairs to disabled people were also made available. Referral medical services were extended to pregnant women.

*"I would not have survived from my precarious condition during pregnancy at a time when we were badly hit by Sidr, had I not been taken to an ActionAid's health camp that provided me a referral to the district hospital at their expense,"* said Laksmi, 26, with tears of joy in her eyes. She gave birth to a baby boy, who sat on her lap as she told us how ActionAid's Sidr response programme had changed her life.



Laksmi said neither she nor her child would be alive today had she not been given a referral and financial support during her advanced stage of pregnancy when she visited the health camp ActionAid set up at East Khantakata primary school on 23 May 2008.

At ActionAid's free eye camps, a total of 228 cataract operations were arranged and almost 99% of patients recovered their sight. Some 203 eyeglasses were supplied, and 641 patients received medicines.



Abu Hanif Kazi, from Khontakata village in Sharankhola Upazila (sub-district), is a barber by profession and was doing quite well before he lost his eyesight. Local physicians advised him to undergo a cataract operation, but the cost was too prohibitive so he dismissed the idea of surgery.

When the devastating cyclone hit in November 2007, Kazi narrowly survived. Unable to see, he was completely dependent on others in his community who helped him shelter in the nearby forest with 500 people. After visiting ActionAid's eye camp, Kazi was sent to the Bangladesh National Society of Blindness hospital in Khulna district, where his eye lens opacity was fixed free of cost.

*“Now I can see the world. It is the happiest moment of my life,”* said Kazi, thanking ActionAid for bringing about this change in his life. Along with eyesight, his livelihood has been restored, as his customers have returned, seeking his barber services.

## Improving livelihoods

ActionAid Bangladesh undertook a cash-for-work programme for those who had lost their livelihoods during the cyclone and supported 567 persons in this programme. Poor women and people with disabilities were paid a daily wage for excavating canals. Various other small livelihood support initiatives helped 70 families restore their income, while some 100 fisher-folk also got livelihood support.

Monju Rani, 50, from Sharankhola Upazila of southern Bagerhat district, lost everything in Sidr and was living on community donations. Her only son is psychologically disabled.



Monju Rani with her cattle



Cattle distribution

ActionAid Bangladesh gave her three cows with a calf and helped her to make a cow shelter to protect her livestock during the monsoon. She used to sell cows' milk at the market before Sidr destroyed her livestock. *“Now once again I will be in a position to produce cows' milk to earn my livelihood”*, Rani said.

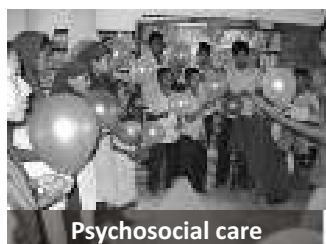
One of ActionAid Bangladesh's most significant achievements was providing livelihood support to 175 women sex workers. The initiative gave the sex workers access to financial institutions, and they were able to open accounts in private sector banks.

## Education

Some 1,040 children were given education kits alongside recreational and extra-curricular materials for their schools. This initiative improved attendance in schools, making them friendly and attractive places for children where they could recover from the traumatic experience and memory of devastation of Sidr.

*"The storm took them away,"* said one child when asked about his parents and school belongings. The disaster hit children hard, so ActionAid Bangladesh arranged psychosocial care for them and supplied lots of educational kits to create joyful learning in schools. The kits contained uniforms, books for children and the school library, a tiffin food box, socks, shoes, play equipment, an umbrella, a hurricane lamp, a pen, a pencil, a geometry box, colour pencils, an eraser, a pencil sharpener, nail clippers and a water flask for carrying clean drinking water from home. Ceiling fans were also supplied to the school classrooms.

A few days after receiving the support, M Moklesur, Safia Akter, M Hanif and M Idris – students in class 3 and 4 at one of the schools – said they were attending school regularly because they have a school bag, shoes and uniform.



Some 130 children received psychosocial care at school to help them return to normal behaviour and recover from the trauma. The team worked with six groups of children in six different villages in the northern districts of Bagerhat and Patuakhali.

## Land rights and homes

ActionAid Bangladesh prioritised the provision of shelters to landless families who had been hit by the cyclone. An ActionAid campaign for the landless people

and subsequent lobbying resulted in the government approving 10 decimals of *khas* (state-owned) land per family. Under an agreement with the government, 21 landless families benefited immediately while another 90 families are currently being given land ownership rights. The poorest of the poor were also supported financially to reconstruct and repair their houses.

## **Emergency relief**

Immediately after Sidr, ActionAid Bangladesh, in collaboration with its partners, provided multi-sectoral emergency relief to more than 188,000 people, prioritising female-headed households and people with disabilities. The support included: food and non-food items; survival kits; shelter; emergency medical support; cash-for-work opportunities; rescue and cleaning; water and sanitation; livelihood support; agricultural and educational support; and psychosocial care. Affected people were provided with a sitting place a separate space was set aside for breastfeeding mothers and clean drinking water. Maintaining the dignity of cyclone-hit people was the cornerstone of ActionAid's emergency response. During a pre-assessment process, the people whose needs were greatest were issued with relief cards so that they would get their relief goods with dignity.

## **Partners and funding**

ActionAid Bangladesh worked with two local partners Jagrata Juba Sangha (JJS) in Bagerhat district and Speed Trust in Patuakhali district. ActionAid International, ActionAid UK, the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), the Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC), Ayuda en Acción, the Marrion Foundation and ActionAid Bangladesh all funded the Cyclone Sidr Recovery Programme.

## **Impacts of the work**

The cash-for-work programme created temporary employment for participants during the lean period in Khulna, Bagerhat, Barguna, Pirojpur and Patuakhali, allowing people to purchase food and urgent supplies for their families. A number of labourers were also engaged in cultivation and harvesting in farming initiatives.

The small livelihood support projects provided resources for poor families who were able to improve their financial status through rearing cows, selling milk etc. Fishing opportunities were created around the year, and the Sidr-affected fishermen who were supported by ActionAid have now returned to their normal livelihoods. ActionAid helped them restore the fishing resources damaged by Sidr and to sell their catch at a fair price without depending on middlemen. Livelihood support to women sex workers developed a money-

saving incentive among them; they now go to the bank to deposit and withdraw their money. Some 22 sex workers invested their money into profitable businesses – such as purchasing boats with engines and were able to support their families and deposit surplus money into bank accounts.

Providing education kits to school students inspired them to attend school regularly. Parents were also comfortable about sending their children to school, and attendance increased.

## Lessons learnt

Among the lessons learnt from the Cyclone Sidr recovery programme is that poor people recover very slowly from such a disaster, while continued relief support paralyses society. Introducing advanced agricultural concepts and skills may also change the traditional concepts in cultivation. Community-led processes ensured people's participation, and helped inspire them. Involving community members in different purchase committees and monitoring processes also encouraged them to take ownership of the works.

It is important to ensure equal participation of men and women, while women also need to be motivated and encouraged to come out from traditional social barriers and establish their rights and equal entitlements. We recommend that other agencies also emphasise this, by ensuring equal participation of men and women.

## Biography:



### **Shirin Akhter**

**Communications Officer, ActionAid Bangladesh**

[shirin.akhter@actionaid.org](mailto:shirin.akhter@actionaid.org)

I am a forward-looking professional with over four years of media, development and programme management experience. I have been at ActionAid Bangladesh since July 2008. I have a post-graduate degree in mass communication and journalism from the University of Dhaka, and prior to ActionAid worked as a sub-editor in Dainik Samakal, a national-level Bengali daily, and staff correspondent at United News of Bangladesh, the country's leading private news agency.

# ***Denied citizenship is recognised: The case of the Urdu-speaking Bihari community of Bangladesh***

***By Subhagya Mangal Chakma***

## ***Summary:***

*The Bihari people were left stateless after Bangladesh's secession from Pakistan in 1971. Originally from India, this Urdu-speaking community was effectively stranded, and lived in refugee camps for the next 37 years, systematically denied citizen status and basic services. In 2001, Biharis started to get organised to demand recognition from the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan. A landmark High Court ruling in 2003 awarded 10 refugee camp dwellers Bangladeshi citizenship and inclusion on the electoral roll. ActionAid Bangladesh consequently worked with local partner SPYRM, who successfully petitioned the High Court for the same rights for all 300,000 Bihari people still living in 116 refugee camps across the country. Following a series of conferences and seminars to raise awareness of the Bihari's plight, and the surrounding media attention, the government finally reviewed their case and on 18 May 2008 the High Court ruled in the Bihari people's favour. Finally, after 37 years in the wilderness, members of the Bihari community were able to cast their first vote in the 2009 Bangladesh national parliamentary election.*

## **Background history:**

In 1947 numerous communities faced the consequences of the social, cultural, economic and political disorder arising from religious-based partition and communal conflict in the Indian subcontinent. Continued conflicts forced the Urdu-speaking Muslim community from the Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Central India and West Bengal to migrate to East Pakistan between 1947 and 1950. The Urdu-speaking Muslims (popularly known as Bihari) were isolated from the mainstream community. Finding themselves in a new environment that was different from their original homeland, they struggled to integrate with the mainstream Bengali-speaking community. However, due to their common language and culture, the Bihari people were favoured by the

Urdu-speaking ruling class, and prospered with good jobs in the civil service, trade, commerce and urban workforce.

The majority of the Bihari community favoured a united Pakistan and therefore opposed the Bengali language movement of 1951 and the liberation war of 1971 which led to the formation of Bangladesh. A large number were killed in an outburst of massive anger against them in 1971, while others lost their homes, businesses and jobs. During this period of turmoil and confusion the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) took responsibility for providing food, shelter and healthcare to the uprooted and displaced Bihari community in 116 ICRC camps across the country. Most of them remained there for the next 37 years.

After the end of the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971, the governments of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh signed the Simla Agreement to resolve the humanitarian crisis created by the nine-month long war. All three countries agreed to take back their stranded nationals through repatriation programmes under the supervision of the ICRC and the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR. Subsequently, Pakistan accepted some 123,000 of the 539,669 Biharis who were stranded in Bangladesh. A few thousand more were repatriated on humanitarian grounds, but not as stranded Pakistanis. Then in 1993, the Pakistan government refused to repatriate the remaining Bihari people, and termed them as Bangladeshi Bihari. At the same time, the Bangladesh government treated these people as stranded Pakistanis and refused to recognise them as Bangladesh citizens.

The Bihari people have been living in refugee camps since 1971, denied an official identity by the state. Deprived of basic services, citizen status and identity, they were left stateless.

## **The journey towards obtaining citizenship**

Biharis born and growing up in the pre- and post- emergence of Bangladesh started to take the initiative for claiming their citizenship from 2001. They formed several bodies – such as the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC); Stranded Pakistanis Youth Rehabilitation Movement (SPYRM); Bangladesh Non-local Welfare and Development Organization; and Bihari Welfare Mission (BWM) – and submitted

"There is no question of returning us to Pakistan. We haven't seen that country, we don't know that country. We were born and brought up here and we want to die here with dignity." Sadakat Khan, Urdu-speaking community leader.

memorandums to the government of Bangladesh and Pakistan several times. But they could not draw attention from governments.

In a separate move, 10 petitioners from the Bihari *Geneva* camp filed a writ with the High Court of Bangladesh demanding citizenship and inclusion on the 2001 electoral roll. On 26 May 2003, the High Court ruled in favor of the petitioners, declaring them Bangladeshi citizens and directing the Election Commission to enroll their names on the voters list. However, in the absence of official policy regarding the Bihari camp dwellers and with the lack of official directions by the Election Commission regarding the registration of camp dwellers in general, the fate of other camp dwellers remained unresolved.

## The road towards significant achievement

ActionAid Bangladesh was working with two local partners – Banaful Social Welfare Organization (BSWO) and the Organization of Art for Children (OACH) to improve the socio-economic development of Bihari camp dwellers in Chittagong district. This partnership gave ActionAid Bangladesh an understanding of the Bihari community's citizenship and humanitarian crisis. In 2005 ActionAid Bangladesh also started working with the Stranded Pakistani Youth Rehabilitation Movement (SPYRM), supporting their legal fight for recognition. SPYRM coordinates and organises the youths of the Bihari community, and leads the movement for a permanent solution of the problems and identity crisis in the Bihari community.

### ActionAid Bangladesh and SPYRM worked together on the following interventions between 2005 and 2008:

**Fact finding:** A study on the life and struggle of the Urdu-speaking community of Bangladesh revealed the present scenario of their life at the camps. The study identified denial of citizenship as the main reason for the problems of the Urdu-speaking community.

**Civil society mobilisation:** A series of national-level conferences, sharing workshops, consultations and seminars on the humanitarian crisis and citizenship issues of the Urdu-speaking community, which were attended by eminent civil society members including legal experts, election commissioners, journalists, academics, political leaders, media personalities and cultural activists. These

The Honorable Justice Nayeemuddin Ahmed declared that there is no constitutional barrier for children born in Bangladesh to become its citizens and enjoy constitutional rights, as long as they show complete allegiance to the country as per the court's directives.

Source: The Daily Star, Sunday 30 April 2006



important stakeholders were sensitised about the Urdu-speaking people's issues and extended their cooperation toward obtaining citizenship for this community. These events received attention in both print and electronic media several times, giving due importance to the concerns raised. ActionAid Bangladesh also produced a documentary on the humanitarian and citizenship crisis issue, titled Akteri Banu, which was screened at the events and broadcast on several satellite channels in Bangladesh.

**Legal aid support:** On 26 November 2007 SPYRM filed a writ petition seeking a High Court order to recognise the 300,000 or so Bihari people living in 116 camps across the country as citizens of Bangladesh, and their inclusion on the electoral roll. ActionAid Bangladesh supported SPYRM's court case by mobilising the mass media, civil society, intellectuals, policymakers and political leaders.

## **The dream finally becomes reality**

Following the series of conferences and seminars, and the resulting media coverage, the Ministry of Home Affairs finally turned its attention the question of Bihari citizenship, and asked the Election Commission to assess the legality of the Urdu speaking people's demand. At the same time, the High Court issued a show cause notice to the Election Commission and the Ministry of Home Affairs, requesting an explanation within two weeks of '*Why the Urdu-speaking people should not be registered as voters*'. The Ministry of Home Affairs and National Election Commission gave a positive response, and on Sunday 18 May 2008 the High Court ruled in favor of the Bihari people. The Election Commission registered all Biharis on the electoral roll and provided them with national identity cards. Finally, after 37 years, the Bihari community people cast their first vote in the Bangladesh national parliament election of 2008.

## **Conclusion:**

More than 36 years ago, the Bihari community lost their nationality. State policy and political disorder meant they were denied recognition and dignity of life and left them to suffer an inhuman life as refugees in 116 camps across the country. They have now been recognised as citizens of Bangladesh; but their struggle is not over: they need to recover their livelihood security so that they can live like others in Bangladesh. Increased development support from the government and development agencies will make a positive contribution to improving their life and livelihood security. The most critical support for this community is proper rehabilitation, access to education, healthcare and workplace opportunities. They have made a contribution to improving the national economy, although classed as refugees, this was not recognised. Finally, now their denied citizenship has been returned to them, they will be enjoying their citizenship rights.

## Biography:



**Subhagya Mangal Chakma**  
Programme Officer, Diversity and Citizenship,  
ActionAid Bangladesh  
[shobhagya.chakma@actionaid.org](mailto:shobhagya.chakma@actionaid.org)

I joined ActionAid Bangladesh in 2007, following more than 15 years with community development NGOs in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

In my current work I promote human rights, dignity and citizenship issues of diverse communities in Bangladesh. I have also worked in community empowerment, advocacy, governance, education, livelihoods and health. My main experience lies in: project design and management; monitoring and evaluation; partnership development and management; fundraising; leadership development; participatory review and reflection process (PRRP); participatory rural appraisal (PRA); and the rights-based approach.

# *The Cyclone SIDR recovery programme in Patuakhali*

*By Sumaiya Tahira*

## **Summary:**

*This evaluation of ActionAid's response to Cyclone SIDR in Patuakhali district, Bangladesh analyses the successes and shortcomings of the programme and draws some useful lessons on how the impact of the response could have been improved.*

One year and two months have passed since Cyclone SIDR (Super Cyclonic Storm) destroyed the lives and livelihoods of the people of Patuakhali district, Bangladesh. One year on, people have started their lives again. Many children have been born, the fisher folk community have returned to their traditional livelihood, the land has become green again, the trees are full of leaves, and students have returned to school with their new school uniforms. Working through our partner organisation Speed Trust, ActionAid helped people recover from the devastation of SIDR through the Cyclone SIDR Recovery Programme. Although the programme reached many of its targets, we recognise that the impact of our efforts would have been far greater with more commitment to



A landless woman who will soon receive land and shelter from AAB in Patuakhali district

local participation in the recovery programme. This is a lesson to be learnt for the future.

## **Background**

ActionAid, with its local partner Speed Trust, launched the Cyclone SIDR Recovery Programme in February 2008, following a thorough assessment of local needs and analysis of local capacities. ActionAid Bangladesh's mandate during any disaster response is to reduce the suffering of the most vulnerable while ensuring that their rights and entitlements to certain basic necessities are secured. The intervention was therefore not determined on the basis of need alone, but also by the lack of access to rights for specific groups – particularly – women, people with disabilities, elderly people, landless poor families and children. The project provided different homestead livelihood supports to help women recover from disaster losses and to alleviate the degree of suffering through livelihood regeneration. The project considers developing local capacity and supporting other local beneficiaries in the implementation of its activities – for example, using local tailors to make school uniforms and local boat makers and carpenters to make new boats for SIDR-affected fisher folk.

The project was designed to address the needs of 2,500 households identified by a survey, for immediate and early recovery through different actions, leading to the prospects for long-term development. In Patuakhali, ActionAid work focused on: health; water and sanitation; agriculture; livelihoods; education; policy influencing; and shelter. Activities were designed to restore people to their normal lives through interventions such as a cash-for-work programme; livelihood promotion by providing cows, poultry, seeds and saplings; creating new water sources; and ensuring access to economic institutions. To decrease long-term dependence on external aid interventions, we also promoted better disaster preparedness and effective emergency responses among locally established clubs and societies rather than providing direct food aid.

## **Key findings of our evaluation**

**Health:** Health intervention activities included: health camps; referral support for pregnant women; wheelchairs for disabled people; cataract treatment; eye glasses (spectacles); eye drops for conjunctivitis; iron, calcium, multivitamin tablets and tetanus injections for women; and information, education and communication materials on health issues.

The health camp was the most successful programme and many people received essential health support after the disaster. We met our target of eight health camps, organised by project staff and local people with the assistance of



**A mother and her baby - she obtained a caesarean through the Health Centre**

the local community. A female doctor was allocated to women's groups, while a male doctor saw male patients. The women received essential reproductive health support, as one middle-aged woman explained during the focus group discussion: *"For my entire life I have suffered from various female diseases, but I cannot say it to anybody; my husband never cares about it, he never thinks that I need treatment as he says those diseases are secret issues. I have relief from my suffering."*

However, a lack of experience and understanding meant that some people could not follow the doctors' instructions. The doctors issued prescriptions, but most of the patients were illiterate and could not remember what the doctors discussed with them about how to take the medicines.

Malnutrition had left many women weak and with other health complications that prevented them from completing their daily household activities, and although the project achieved its target of providing 420 women with iron, calcium, and multivitamin tablets, proper instructions on how to take them would have made the programme more effective. The programme also failed to include follow-up on the patients after providing the tablets, so many women did not understand the importance of completing the prescribed course. Some women said, *"When we started feeling better, we gave the tablets to our children and our husbands."*

The lesson from this is that programme activities must take the local context into account. Relevant risks factors should be analysed before the programme is implemented, on the basis of social context and individual capability. Such an analysis would make the programme more effective, as alternative ways of providing for participation could be sought that are appropriate to local conditions.

**Empowering people with disabilities:** Our target was to provide wheelchairs for seven disabled people, and six people received them. They were selected by means of a social survey, which determined the poorest and most vulnerable people who needed a wheelchair for normal movement. One of the aims of the recovery programme was to bring back dignity of life to disabled people. Those who received wheelchairs are happy with their day-to-day lives, because they could move independently. Some of them started working in roadside shops and grocer shops, and were able to contribute to their family income. Having a wheelchair has also allowed them to maintain their social relations, while their socio-economic acceptance increased as they were not a burden on their families.

The wheelchairs were bought by Speed Trust's purchase committee. However, a follow-up visit just one month after they had been delivered found that the wheelchairs were low quality, and the wheelchair users has not been informed about maintenance and servicing needs. As a result, some devices had already become unusable: the salinity broke the wheels, cloth seats were torn and the wheel handles broken. The objective of the project was not only to provide material support, but also to think about the sustainability of the programme and the positive impact this would have on people with disabilities. So, in selecting the wheelchairs, the purchase committee should have chosen the best quality they could find.

**Education:** We supplied recreation equipment – including: sports equipment such as footballs, cricket bats and balls and rackets; board games such as carom and ludo; playground equipment such as slides, seesaws and swings; and books – to three schools affected by the cyclone. It was great fun for the students of the three schools to get the playing materials as well as new school uniforms. As a result, dropout rates decreased and school attendance increased rapidly. However, Speed Trust did not control the quality of the recreation equipment, so many of these – including the playground equipment fell out of use within a very short time; the children became



A sand filter added to a pond through coordination between gov't and other NGOs

disheartened and lost their enthusiasm for school. The purchase committee should have been more rigorous in selecting quality materials to purchase.

**Livelihood support:** Another target of the recovery programme was to provide 2,500 families with poultry support after the disaster. While people got the support as per our targets, all the poultry, along with other poultry birds the community already had, died within 10 days on account of poor management. Speed Trust's purchase committee procured the birds from various sources and gathered them in a small congested room, without making suitable preparations or planning for the management of the poultry. The community also has their own traditional knowledge for poultry management, but neither Speed Trust nor the community followed this. As a result, the birds were unfed for a long time. Another fault was that poultry rearing training was held after the birds had been distributed, rather than *prior* to distribution.

Women were especially vulnerable to the effects of the failure of this project, as they depend on poultry for both food and income. The poultry was the only protein source for families after Cyclone SIDR, so the nutritional condition of children and women – including pregnant and breastfeeding women – deteriorated. They were also the women's main source of income; so the sudden loss of the birds had a negative impact throughout the community.

## Lessons learnt

Our assessment of the impact of the disaster recovery programme highlights that knowledge sharing, local participation and planning are all essential to make a programme effective and successful. If the community actively participates, they can share their knowledge, and thus give their support to the best effort and the best output of the programme.

Our partner organisation worked very hard in the rough weather and the vulnerable situation in the aftermath of Cyclone SIDR. However, a lack of effective planning meant that the recovery programme did not have the most effective impact for the people of Patuakhali who had been affected by SIDR. Nevertheless, if partner staff are committed, and if community participation can be ensured, vulnerable people can recover with the intervention of a short-term project.

## Biography:



### **Sumaiya Tahira**

**Programme Officer, Monitoring and Evaluation,  
ActionAid Bangladesh**

I have been working with poor and marginalised people for two and half years first as a social change agent and since July 2008 at ActionAid Bangladesh. I have a masters degree in social science and am proud to be an ActionAider. I am passionate about the marginalised people of my country and women's rights. I am also committed to bringing about the active participation of communities and ensuring the effective impact of our work.

---

## **Acknowledgements:**

Great thanks to Silva Ferretti, who undertook the evaluation of the AAB Disaster Response Programme (Cyclone SIDR), for the photographs (and their descriptive text) that are incorporated into this story.



# *Shiuly's fight against social norms leads the way for women's rights*

**By Tahmina Huq**

## **Summary:**

*When Shiuly became pregnant after an eight-month affair with Habibur, he denied the relationship and refused to marry her. Socially isolated as a single mother, Shiuly and her uncle sought help from his Reflect circle and the local people's organisation and fought for her child's legal recognition and for her own rights to dignity, mobility and life. When the local mediation forum reached a stalemate, they did not give up and looked for support elsewhere, eventually taking the case to district court and gaining local media attention. This is the story of a courageous woman who takes on the outdated norms of a patriarchal society. But it is also the story about how individual effort can make bigger things happen and bring about social change; about how a social movement can mobilise people, confront prejudiced social attitudes and help communities safeguard their rights even when there is no specific law on the statute.*

## **Introduction**

Male domination over women is deeply rooted in Bangladesh society, which is driven by patriarchal ideology. Women often have to struggle to ensure their rights against societal norms and practices in a context where culture and religion uphold patriarchy. In cases of sexual relationship before marriage or adultery resulting in pregnancy, the situation for women becomes more critical if the relationship is denied by the male partner. Shiuly's story is like that. Fighting social stigma, ignorance among family members and isolation from her community, she challenged the unequal and unjust decisions of society while also working to ensure her child's rights. She filed a case for her child's identity and the court ruled in her favour. It happened in a village named Manikpur, in Jibon Nagar Upazilla, Chuadanga district.

## **Background**

In 2006 ActionAid Bangladesh launched a programme in Chuadanga district called *Breaking the Silence of Violence* (BRAVE), which uses a proactive

approach with preventive and curative interventions to stop domestic violence. A BRAVE circle is formed with elderly men, women, adolescent boys and girls. Members meet together to discuss and identify their problems, focusing on violence against women and work out an action plan within the community. SVAW (Stop violence against women) networks also work to address any kind of violence. In normal life, women are vulnerable. They become even more vulnerable when they are survivors of violence; there is usually a tendency in society to blame the violence on the survivors.

The BRAVE project has formed a very strong network as a SVAW platform. The network includes local social leaders from different political parties, journalists, lawyers, locally elected members and an elected chair. They have started to intervene in cases of violence, along with ActionAid Bangladesh's local partner, WAVE Foundation, which is currently implementing the BRAVE project. This SVAW platform, known as lokomorcha, operates at three levels: union (grassroots tier of government administration), Upazilla and district levels.

### **Shiuly's story – a story of strategy by partner and network**

Shiuly is a poor woman. She became pregnant after an eight-month affair with Habibur, who consequently denied the relationship and refused to marry her.



Shiuly and her baby

She struggled with many issues and was socially isolated, while her rights to dignity, mobility and life were violated. ActionAid Bangladesh helped her fight for recognition of her identity as a single mother and to ensure her rights to life in society.

Shiuly's case came to the attention of the Wave Foundation through a *Reflect* circle – a group of community members who meet to reflect on and solve their own problems. Shiuly's uncle Roice Uddin is a member of a BRAVE *Reflect* circle; he had also studied family violence issues and legal support mechanisms. He used to visit the *lokokendra* (people's organisation), and approached both the elderly BRAVE *Reflect* circle and the *lokokendra* advisor for help in resolving Shiuly's problem. On the initiative of the *Reflect* circle and *lokokendra*, local social leaders, Union Parishad (local government) members and the network chairman all sat for the resolution of the dispute. Habibur was asked to marry Shiuly and recognise the baby. He denied the relationship, claiming that this was an unfair allegation against him, and accused Shiuly of having had relationships with more than one man. After listening to Shiuly's statement, members of *shalish* (mediation forum) proposed to Habibur's family that he marry Shiuly. Habibur and his father refused their proposal and offered them money instead. The *shalish* was suspended as the dispute parties could not come to an agreement, so Roice Uddin took the case up to the Upazilla *lokomorcha* the second tier of SVAW network.

To fight for a single mother's identity in Bangladesh society is quite a daunting task, due to existence of disapproving social norms and prejudices and a lack of laws or polices in the legal system. Women in Bangladesh are not usually brave enough to disclose and seek justice from society as society does not take warmly to women's sexual rights issues, and community members tend to attach a stigma to women's sexual relationships before marriage. In this respect, Shiuly set herself up as an example of revolt against patriarchy.

After investigating and analysing the facts of Shiuly's case, the *lokomorcha* decided to handle the case strategically so they could fight for the child's social identity without inflaming negative community sentiment towards the single mother. Without taking either party's side, they expressed their commitment to find out the father of the child through a DNA test, if the matter could not be resolved through local mediation.

Members of the *lokomorcha*, the BRAVE *Reflect* circle and Shiuly's family went to Jibon Nagar Upazilla police station to file a case against Habibur. The police officer refused to file it, so they filed a case at the district judge court under the

*Women and Child Repression Act 2000* section 9 (1) and under the amended Act 2003 section 13. Journalists from the local social movement played a major role in focusing attention on the issues, and a local daily newspaper *Mathabhanga* published a series of features on Shiuly's case, demanding punishment of Habibur. This mobilised community interest in the issues.

Shiuly was given counselling support by a psychologist under the project who also conducted counselling sessions for groups of people. It helped Shiuly and her family members to carry their confidence to seek justice.

The legal process was lengthy and Shiuly badly needed basic supplies – especially for her baby – that she and her family could not afford. The *lokokendra* took care of Shiuly and her child, supplying baby milk, a mosquito net and baby clothes.

After a long period of monitoring and societal pressure, judgment finally came in Shiuly's favour. Judgment clearly stated that the baby's father is Habibur and she was cleared of his allegation of having physical relationships with several men. The judge did not order the DNA test, because the baby looked just like Habibur.

Shiuly's struggle is important because she is now enjoying social rights and as well can cover her basic needs. Her story is no longer one of isolation from the community because she is getting skills training, and earning her own meals through government and non-governmental organisation initiatives. Other community members no longer shun her or her child and mix with them quite freely. The *lokomorcha*, along with local people's organisations, is fighting against social beliefs and prejudices because in our patriarchal society a single mother has no recognition. In such cases the woman is always characterised a bad while the man faces no such accusation. Unfortunately, Shiuly is not completely free of such accusations, as there are certain community members who will not change their attitudes.

Shiuly's rights were severely violated. She was socially isolated, was being denied her rights to life, justice, livelihood, dignity, family, to be a mother and to have children. Now, thanks for SVAW, she can enjoy several rights in life.

## **Lessons learnt**

On a personal level, Shiuly's story gives me immense courage to work to change the society, especially to work for women's rights. It also reminds me that individual effort can make bigger things happen. It can involve society and may sometimes achieve justice for survivors.

In Chuadanga district the BRAVE project has started to break up social prejudices. The local civil society group has joined the cause, by forming a SVAW platform to fight social injustices on violence against women. A few years ago, a single mother could not stay in the community – and the stories of many incidents against such women remain untold. But today we have reached a point where we are seeing some social change, where a platform like the *lokomorcha* is raising voices to establish the identity of Shiuly's child. And community members everywhere are raising Shiuly and her child through their own contribution from their own platforms, the *lokokendra*.

Shiuly suffered a lot due to the patriarchal system. She is still fighting against society and surviving, even though she got recognition of her child. She has taught us that if people mobilise from a rights perspective, they can change social norms and attitudes towards life.

## Biography:



### **Tahmina Huq**

**Deputy Manager, Stop Violence Against Women, ActionAid Bangladesh**

[tahmina.huq@actionaid.org](mailto:tahmina.huq@actionaid.org)

I joined ActionAid Bangladesh's women's rights and gender department in May 2005. In our society, women do not enjoy equal sexual rights. The law is discriminatory towards women, and social stigma often prevents survivors of violence from getting justice. I use my legal analysis and interpretation skills to advocate with government and non-governmental organisations and to mobilise people into taking action to achieve equal dignity for women and men. I am committed to and inspired by my work, and stories like Shiuly's give me courage to work to change society.



## **Impact Assessment & Shared Learning (IASL)**

### **ActionAid Bangladesh**

House-8, Road-136, Gulshan-1, Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh  
Tel: (88-02) 8837796, 9894331, 9894216, 8835632, 8835398

Facsimile: (88-02) 8815087

Web: [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)