

## Research reveals that raising awareness and community involvement together can reduce the challenges of NGO workers in addressing violence against women

**19 January, Dhaka:** While addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG) NGO workers and community volunteers often experience verbal abuse and open threats from perpetrators which hampers their work and damage their social standing. These were some of the findings that were revealed through the joint study undertaken by icddr,b and BRAC titled “The challenges of NGO workers in responding to violence against women and girls: the ways forward”.

A seminar was held to disseminate the study findings on 19 January 2015 at icddr,b’s Sasakawa Auditorium. Executive Director, Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK) and the chief guest of the seminar, Dr Sultana Kamal addressing a concern from the audience, she said that, “seeing the facts of the research it seems we are at the same place we were 30 years back”. She also added, “Women in Bangladesh has progressed and this is the reason that violence has also increased as their progress is a challenge to patriarchal ideology which has made them fight back more intensively,”

This research aimed to explore the challenges that NGO workers face while responding to cases of violence against women and girls in rural and urban areas. The study also explored the workers’ coping strategies, consequences of the challenges and how those challenges can be effectively addressed. The project received assistance from Gender Justice and Diversity, BRAC.

The data of this qualitative research were collected between February and July 2014 from low and high prevalent rural areas – Comilla and Naogaon respectively, and urban areas of Comilla and Dhaka. Ninety nine male and female NGO workers and community volunteers from five small and large NGOs, were interviewed. The study followed the WHO recommendations for researching violence against women.

The issue of violence against women in Bangladesh is not a new one. Women and girls of Bangladesh are victims of disparity, discrimination and exploitation. NGOs have always initiated interventions to combat VAWG where NGO workers are one of the key players. Yet, the challenges they faced while responding to VAWG remained unexplored. Findings of this research clearly indicated the NGO workers-both men and women face adverse effects of responding to VAWG at various levels-in rural and urban areas, and the consequences of these challenges at family, work, and community levels.

Dr Sheeba Hafiza, director of the Gender, Justice, Diversity, and Advocacy for Social Change unit of BRAC was present as special guest and Dr Abbas Bhuiya, deputy executive director, icddr,b chaired the seminar.

### Key findings of the study

In the study findings revealed that NGO workers and community volunteers discussed that they are facing similar challenges in Comilla and Naogaon districts. However, in Naogaon some of the challenges are more intense. Some of the challenges are mentioned below:

1. Common challenges include non-cooperation from the community, resisting NGO workers’ initiatives responding to VAWG
2. Perpetrators make alliance with local influential people for escaping punishment and threaten NGO workers while addressing VAWG incidents.
3. Often perpetrators and their influential alliance pressurize and intimidate survivors for withdrawing complaints. Hence, sometimes non-cooperation comes from survivors and/or their families i.e.

unwillingness to disclosure of VAWG incidents, seeking legal help, and continuing legal process to the end.

4. Corruption at individual and institutional level (e.g. Union Parishad, police, hospitals etc.) are one of the challenges which NGO workers facing.
5. In Naogaon, challenges such as religious conservatism, predominance of patriarchal social norms, and negative attitude towards NGOs are more intense compared to Comilla.
6. The workers of small NGOs mentioned challenges that are unique and attributable to their programme design and management systems such as absence of legal support system within organisations and adolescent community volunteers being ignored in the community etc.
7. Challenges involved in responding to VAWG among special populations are often attributable to the special characteristics of the population they address such as lack of legal status for sex work, human rights of sex workers being ignored by the state and sex workers themselves, vulnerability of special populations etc.

Responding to VAWG is often fraught with a lot of challenges coming from different sources e.g. individuals, family, community and institutions and beyond. The challenges intensify when actors at multiple levels join hands in hindering justice. As consequences NGO workers experience verbal abuse, threats from perpetrators and their alliances, fear, trauma and tension, and damaged reputation in public while addressing VAWG. Working with sex workers and/or on VAWG often has a damaging effect on NGO workers' reputation in the community as well.

#### **Recommendations:**

The study made the following recommendations to overcome the challenges NGO workers face while addressing VAWG:

- Further prioritising response to VAWG at organisation level.
- Involving more men as volunteers
- Sensitisation training for volunteers working in conservative communities,
- Awareness raising at the community level for improved community response and cooperation with NGO workers.
- Holding duty bearers (i.e. UP Chairman and members) accountable for their role in responding to VAWG.
- Formalisation of collaboration of small NGOs with relevant public and/or legal private service providers for better response to VAWG.
- Advocacy on human rights of sex workers and other special populations.

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