

The Role of Local Government to Reduce Violence against Women and girls in Bangladesh

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Abstract: Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the major concerns in achieving the equal rights for men and women in the society. One of the objectives of this article is to see the extent of Government interventions to reduce VAWG in Bangladesh as the successive governments of Bangladesh have introduced a number of initiatives and initiated reforms to end VAWG. Worldwide, many of the countries have appointed their local government to reduce VAWG and this new trend is also instigated in Bangladesh through a Joint Program of Bangladesh government, UN bodies and some other Partner organizations. Secondly, this study aims to ascertain the role and contribution of Local government to reduce VAWG at the local level in Bangladesh. As this study involves in-depth understanding of governance interventions to reduce VAWG and based on secondary data, an extensive literature review has been done. The study result indicates that local representatives could be the impending bodies to end VAWG from the local level in Bangladesh. Moreover, this study suggests to involve Local government in making a better future for women and to eradicate the root of violence to ensure a dignified co-existence for women in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Local Government in Bangladesh, Violence against Women and Girls, Government initiatives to end VAWG

Introduction

The old days are gone when the role of women were confined in the kitchen and giving birth only. Their world was never exposed to our society, to the media, to us. Now, women are working, contributing in the same way as men. But, from the time in the kitchen to the office, women were always the victim of violence in different form, in different way. Since women are not confined in the kitchen anymore, now they started to talk about what sort of violence they are facing in their everyday lives. Therefore 'violence against women' and the probable solutions are one of the major priorities in the modern civilized world. "Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women. The UN defines violence against women and girls (VAWG) as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life' [1]. Violence against women and girls includes battering, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence, and violence related to exploitation, sexual harassment, and

intimidation at work, in educational institutions, and elsewhere, trafficking in women, forced prostitution, and violence perpetrated or condoned by the state [2]. This term is also named as violence against women (VAW), gender based violence (GBV). Violence can be occurred in any societies, to a greater or lesser degree and women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture. Worldwide one in three women has experienced physical or sexual violence because of being a woman [3]. According to World Bank data, women aged (15-44) are more at danger from rape and domestic violence than from war, cancer or motor accidents. Globally, as many as 38 per cent of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner [4]. Most of the women are at greater risk of being sexually assaulted or exploited, either in childhood, adolescence, or as adults. In Europe, North America and Australia, over half of women with disabilities have experienced physical abuse, compared to one-third of non-disabled women [3]. To secure the society specially women from the risk of violence, most of the countries in the world have given maximum priority and have undertaken lots of initiatives to reduce VAWG. Worldwide 89 states has some form of legislative prohibition on domestic violence, and a growing number of countries had instituted national plans of action to end VAWG [3]. A new trend, engaging local government to reduce VAWG is

flourishing all over the world and becoming popular with time. Recently, Australian government has introduced a national plan to reduce VAWG by strengthening the local and indigenous community. Likewise, the United States of America has started a project to train male and female police officers on 'how to investigate gender-based violence cases'; built police stations in remote areas; and provided essential equipment enabling police to be more responsive to the community, and also funded a public awareness campaign on gender-based violence. Afghan government has undertaken some initiatives for strengthening their local unit against violence. Furthermore, in Timor Leste, Fokupers and in Egypt, some NGOs are providing legal aid services and informing local and religious leaders about the adverse effects of female genital mutilation/cutting and calling for an end of such practice. Both developed and developing countries, Islamic and non-Islamic countries are taking such effective initiatives to reduce violence against women and to make the society equal for girls and women's development. Among Muslim majority countries Bangladesh has also been at the forefront of addressing gender discrimination challenges and ensuring rights of women. The government of Bangladesh has taken several steps both legislative as well as administrative to empower women and reduce VAWG. These initiatives include but are not limited to enactment of several laws as well as affirmative action such as compulsory inclusion of women representatives in local government with the expectations that these measures would assist in empowering women, improve gender equality and protect them against VAWG.

In the context of the above, this study aims to explore the extent of government initiatives to reduce VAWG and also aims to ascertain the contribution of local government to implement the government initiatives to reduce VAWG at local level in Bangladesh.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Bangladesh

In a Muslim majority and patriarchy dominated society in Bangladesh, violence against women and girls is often considered to be acceptable behavior [5]. Women in Bangladesh are everyday targets of discrimination, exploitation, and different types of violence namely sexual harassment, sexual assault including rape, murder and grievous hurt, domestic violence, dowry related violence, acid throwing, trafficking, kidnapping and abduction, illegal fatwa and illegal arbitration, minority violence, wage discrimination and social discrimination, health and nutritional deficiency etc. According to a recent United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report, Bangladesh now has a higher number of incidents of violence against women and girls than any other countries of the world [6]. There are many explored and unexplored reasons behind these violence such as patriarchal

system and negative mindset; lack of implementation of laws; failure of the Judiciary; lack of victim and witness protection; corruption and criminalization of the members of law enforcement agencies; economic instability; and weak administration and so on [7].

In rural areas, women are mostly victim of domestic violence as they spend on hearth most of the time. Despite being proscribed through the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that 66 per cent of Bangladeshi girls especially in rural areas are married before the age of 18 and approximately one third of women aged 20 to 24 were married by the age of 15 [8]. The traditional justice system also known as *Village shalish*¹ is a common platform to suppress and deprive women in rural areas. Many women seek remedy from there but in most of the cases, the results go negative and women have to be subjected to beating, whipping and stoning following *fatwa* rulings by the *shalish* committee. In spite of High Court Divisions repeated order to stop illegal punishments such as whipping, lashing and public humiliations; still women are punished by such brutal ways due to *shalish* decisions. Sometimes these experiences lead women to commit suicide.

In Bangladesh, all over the country about 87 per cent of married women have ever experienced any type of violence only by their husband [9]. Girls and young women are the most common victims of acid attacks and are a high-risk group for experiencing violent death. Both in rural and urban areas, it is very common that women who are experiencing or have experienced violence are likely to be fearful or embarrassed to talk about their experiences to others (Begum 2000) [10]. Moreover, in a Muslim majority and traditional value dependent society like Bangladesh, many incidents of VAWG are not reported to the police or in the media because of social stigma and sometimes because of family pressure. According to police data, 1, 09,621 complaints of various forms of violence against women were lodged within two years (2010-2012) [11]. Of these 18,484 complaints were taken into cognizance, but only 6,875 cases were deemed 'genuine' and 'fit' for further proceedings [11]. VAWG may also result in unwanted pregnancy and abortions and low birth weight among infants, a health report shows that 14 per cent of pregnant women die as a result of violence in Bangladesh [4]. And this rate of violence is not decreasing rather it is increasing alarmingly every day. In between January – June 2015, 75 girls and women were victims of sexual harassment, 25 acid attacked, 84

¹ *Shalish* refers to a community-based, largely informal rural Bangladeshi process through which small panels of influential local figures help resolve community members' disputes and/or impose of sanctions on them.

women were subjected to dowry violence and 298 females were reportedly raped [7].

As this study aims to see the extent of government initiatives to reduce violence against women in Bangladesh, an extensive literature review has been done on government interventions based on secondary data.

Government interventions to end VAWG in Bangladesh

The journey to ensure women's security and to reduce any sort of violence in Bangladesh began since the independence in 1971 by ensuring the equal rights in the constitution. The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for both men and women in all spheres of state and public life. Even some of the articles in the Constitution are firmly patronizing towards women rights. According to Article 28 (1) states: The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. In addition the Article 28 (4) states: Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens. Article 10 further provides that steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life as a fundamental principle of state policy (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 1972). Bangladesh has also signed its commitments to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1984 and accepted Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) in 1995 to attain the objectives of safeguarding gender equality, legal rights and thus empowerment of women.

Under the Law commission Act of 1996, Bangladesh government has created a permanent Law Commission to review all laws related to protection of women's rights and to provide recommendations wherever it is necessary. The government of Bangladesh has introduced, enacted and amended many relevant and necessary laws to protect women's legal rights and improve their social status. Those include enacting of *The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980* which forbids anyone from giving or receiving dowry and *The Nari-O-Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000 (Law on the Suppression of Violence against Women and Children, 2000)* for the first time expanded the definition of rape considerably and the sexual assault and sexual harassment have been made punishable offences; *Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2000* and *Acid control Act, 2000* to prevent from the acid violence. For preventing women from violence, government has enacted *Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act, 2010*

In January 2002, the Bangladesh government has signed "SAARC Convention on Prevention and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for

Prostitution". Resolutions were adopted to step up cooperation among law enforcement authorities to fight trafficking in women and children, terrorism, and drug trafficking. The 13th SAARC Summit, which took place in Dhaka in November 2005, reiterated the pledge made at the 11th conference to continue to work towards addressing the challenges faced by women and children in SAARC countries.

A Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence against Women and girls under the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and a Joint United Nations Programme has started to Address VAWG in 2008. Seven One-Stop Crisis Centers have been established under this programme where victims receive medical, psychosocial and legal assistance. These centers are really helpful for acid-throwing and rape victims and for lodging quick Formal Investigation Record (FIR) and other legal services. There is also a National Trauma Counselling Centre and Helpline for victims.

The National Human Rights Commission has a women's cell assigned to monitor the rights of women in Bangladesh. It has launched several campaigns to raise awareness on the issue of violence against women. In addition, the police possess a "zero tolerance" policy when dealing with cases of violence against women. Some police stations have Special Cell for Women. At the national, district and Thana levels, Committees for the Prevention of VAWG have been formed. In 2009, the first Victim Support Centre was established at Tejgaon Thana Model Police Station. The rehabilitation services are implemented by 10 NGOs who have signed Memoranda of Agreement with the police. Violence prevention cells also exist in the Department of Women's Affairs and the Jatiyo Mahila Sangastha. Shelter homes for abused and tortured women and for women under safe custody have also been established both by the government and NGOs, though far too inadequate to meet the needs.

Another step towards women's development is to reform policies to involve women in public and private sectors such as mandatory inclusion of women vice chairman and women members at the Upozilla and Union Parishad level in local government of Bangladesh. According to the Upozilla parishad Act, 1998 Bangladesh government specified that women representatives should chair at least one-third percent of the local government at the Union Parishad level. Later on, in 2009, the government has amended the Act and ensured compulsory inclusion of woman representation as vice chairman at the upozilla level of Local government. Women's entry into these positions and their experiences in negotiating with other actors have led to changes in their aspirations and increased their voice and legitimacy within their communities and also by negotiating with gender biased culture, attitude and norms they acquired skills and knowledge about how to operate in the public sphere and how to do politics[12].

According to the Upozila Parishad Manual, women councilors have been assigned with some special duties such as upgrading the situation of women and children, building awareness and to take necessary steps on violence against women, dowry and child marriage and some others to ensure the rights of women and to strengthen the position of women in the society.

Besides the above, the National women's advancement policy, 2015 and some other long term national plans such as Vision 2021, the Perspective Plan (2010-2021), sixth Five Year Plan and Gender Mainstreaming have also taken with a common vision to empower women and for the advancement of women and to address and reduce VAW with a top priority. In addition, the Election Commission (EC) has taken steps towards strengthening women's political inclusion by imposing a 33 per cent reservation for women in all political party's executive committee positions including the central committee by 2020 in Bangladesh.

The contribution of Local government to reduce VAW in Bangladesh

The Local government in Bangladesh is a legislative body controlled by the central government as well as an important developing partner of the government. According to the article 59(1) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law". In Bangladesh, the Local government system continues with three-tier framework- union parishad, upazila and district. Upozila (mid-tier of LG) works as a bridge between local and national government and both Upozila and Union Parishad help to promote and execute government (national and international) programs, projects etc at the local level all over the country. Mainly the Local government system aims to unite the local community. By definition, local government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government [13]. Local government is in the front line of public service delivery, providing education, healthcare, transport, water and sanitation, electricity and security, stimulating economic development and also important for gender equality [12]. It is proved that local representatives can easily understand the demand or necessity of people than the representatives of central government [14]. In 1998, the Bangladesh government specified that women representatives should chair at least one-third of the project development committees, would be members of one-third of the project implementation committees and distribute 30 per cent of the resources allocated to the Union Parishad by the centre. According to Union Parishad Act of 1998, the Union Parishad consists of 13 members: a chair, nine general members (can be male or female and are elected by ward) and three women in the reserved seats (elected

by zone). On the other hand, according to the Upazila Parishad Act 2009, each Upozila consists of a chairman, a vice chairman and a woman vice chairman through direct election. The post of a woman vice chairman was created to ensure at least one-third woman representation in the all elected posts of the local government.

According to the Union Parishad Act of 1998 and Upozila Manual of 2009, the local government councillors have some assigned duties for the advancement of women in Bangladesh such as initiating women empowering activities, increasing small entrepreneurship, and taking necessary actions against VAWG. Also Local government councillors are contributing to address poverty, income inequality, malnutrition, maternal mortality and famine and providing the benefits of safety net programs to local poor people. As the members of *Village Shalish* committee, local representatives have brought about a positive change in the outcome of the rural *Shalish* as well which help rural women to obtain social justice and a more secure life. Taking part in *Shalish* has a long-term effect in women's life such as now women have proper capacity to deal with life-related matters with proper dignity and honour in their own family. On the other hand, it gives them a strong position to perform their social promises and duties and to ensure the rule of law in the society.

In 2013, Bangladesh Government including Ministry of Education (MoE), Local Government & Rural Development (LGRD), Ministry of Expatriate Welfare & Overseas Employment (MoEWOE), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoH&FW), Ministry of Information (MoI), Ministry of Labour & Employment (MoLE), Ministry of Law, Justice & Parliamentary Affairs (MoLJPA), Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), Ministry of Women & Children Affairs (MoWCA), Ministry of Youth & Sports (MoYS) and UN including ILO, IOM, UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, WHO launched a programme to contribute to the long term sustainable socioeconomic development of rural Bangladesh specially supporting poor women under development programmes based on its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The main focus of the program was to encourage the adoption and implementation of policies for preventing violence and supporting survivors by enhancing the capacities of the government, improving information and providing support to NGOs and civil society. The programme also emphasized in changing the attitudes and behaviour of men, women, boys and girls to reduce VAWG and supported the survivors of GBV with immediate care, aid and rehabilitation.

With the help of the Upozila and Union level women affair officers and Local government women

representatives, this programme was launched in 44 unions under six Upozilas (sub-districts) in six project districts and introduced a database with information on women survivors of violence (acid attacks, rape, murder, physical torture, dowry, early marriage, family conflict, suicide and *hilla marriage*² etc.) and the services provided such as court cases by DLAC, counselling and legal aid by BRAC, *shalish* by the Union Parishad, and others. Also the local level officers were trained to provide legal and immediate support to the victim of violence as it was an objective of the programme. This initiative resulted positive to reduce violence against women and the result included [15]:

- 100% of marriages have been registered (total 15,511).
- 1,056 community members solicited legal, medical and counselling services.
- 858 family conflicts have been resolved.
- 243 early marriages have been stopped.

Thus these women representatives are contributing to social justice and good governance at the local level, as well as enhancing women's position in the society. A significant number of cases reveal that woman councillors are playing desired role and deliver justice in the society if they are provided with an enabling environment and a legal framework.

Conclusion

Violence against women and girls characterizes as an ecological consequence of direct and interacting influences operating at the individual, relationship, family, community, and societal levels. In spite of existing government initiatives, plans; scholarly studies and national and international NGO projects and programs, the UN estimates that still more than 600 million women live in countries where violence especially domestic violence is not considered a crime. To end VAWG in Bangladesh, the government, NGOs and international organizations have undertaken and continuing different initiatives though violence are taking different forms and perpetrators are changing their strategies. So the government should adopt new policies and programs to stop and to prevent violence. It is recommended that a comprehensive response, based on principles of human rights and ensuring survivor-centered and empowering approaches, is needed to address VAWG; including political commitment and resource mobilization, legal, and judicial and security sector reform, health sector responses, response from the education sector, use of mass media and community mobilization. As a result of earlier researches on

² Hilla Marriage means "interim marriage". In Islam, if a Muslim man utters the talaq word 3 times to his wife, he has effectively divorced her. But if that same Muslim man then regrets it and wants to resume his marriage to his now ex-wife, the process is not so simply as getting remarried again. Islamic Sharia requires the now divorced woman to enter into a hilla marriage with another man, have the marriage consummated, and then her new husband must divorce her. Only then can she remarry her former first husband.

VAWG, a complete and updated database was a necessity for planning interventions to combat and prevent violence and also to determine women friendly policies, proper budget allocation, enact or amend legislation, along with identifying funding priorities and evaluation of existing measures, steps, interventions and laws. And this step towards reducing VAWG has been completed by 'MDGF Thematic Window: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment' program with the help of the local government specially the women councilors in 2013. Likewise, to eradicate the root of VAWG and to change the attitude towards violence needs policies to engage men and boys in making public spheres free from violence and secure for women and girls. Moreover, programs should be taken for male perpetrators that are incorporated with the judicial sector. On the hand, victims must be provided legal, financial and medical support for quick recovery. It is proved that, the representatives of Local government in Bangladesh could be the key performers in raising awareness on the adverse impact of VAWG and promoting public legal education to strengthen legal solutions in their local areas. In addition, local government councilors are the most appropriate body to respond regarding primary preclusion of violence, responding to survivors of violence.

Women are almost the half of the nation in Bangladesh and the constitution of Bangladesh allows them to enjoy all the legal rights as men, so it is expected that the study findings would help in formulation of new policies and interventions or reform the existing that could strengthen the on-going actions for reducing VAWG in Bangladesh and thus pave the way for a more equal, violence free and dignified co-existence of women and girls in Bangladesh.

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