

GRASSROOT VOICE

Year 04 April 27, 2013 Vol. 05

EDITORIAL

Women's empowerment bears no meaning unless they gain adequate space to move, talk, and access to the services and possess capacity to express opinion liberally. Women being the half of the country's total population use to contribute to nation's development but their position in the society and rights as well are not equally regarded in comparison to their male counterpart. So to speak, existing societal system pushes the Bangladeshi women to the subordinate position. In fact the process starts at home just with the birth of a child and lasts for life time. But it is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy for them, rather an obligatory interest for the women.

There has been a little step up in the overall situation of women in Bangladesh over the last couple of decades. But there is still gap that needs to be addressed. Above all, the progress is seen in the reduction of gender gap in different arena. For instance, currently gender relations have been increased in the schools, in the work places but as far as rights are concerned the women still fall behind. Their existence in the political activities is inferior to their male counterpart yet. They strive to establish their rights in family, society and in the state as well. Yet the women face discrimination, exclusion and injustice. In addition, violence against women makes women socially vulnerable and prevents them from participating in the societal events.

Unnayan Shahojogy Team (UST) in compliance to its goal currently undertakes a program in Nilphamari entitled **Regional program to promote gender equality and political participation in Bangladesh** in partnership with PyD- a Spain-based INGO under financial assistance of **aecid**. This program typically concentrates on women's holistic development, especially socio-political empowerment which is focused to their self-determined change. The program implies to bring together the rights and entitlements of the poor women and help them build capacity to understand and create demands.

Approach of this program encompasses education, training on governance, human, women rights, electoral process, capacity building, collaborative meeting, awareness sessions, and national and international day observance, advocacy workshop etc. involving Local Government Institution (LGI)

This edition reveals a few works providing the readers with some information of the program as UST's ventures with regard to women empowerment.

UST and development philosophy

UST's start in the development arena is attributed by a variety of philosophies typically related to empowerment of all those strive hard to make both ends meet. Philosophy of development of UST does not merely depend on the theory of "program for program sake". Rather its philosophy combines a broad sketch of current developmental theory with the existing needs drawn by detailed discussions of the people within specific guidelines at community level. UST's framework encompasses the understanding of collective development, participation of the people for whom the development is sought for. Concentration is given to rich relations between stakeholders, development of concepts, strategies, education, capacity building and linkage.



Several projects are in progress with common issues of empowerment of the women who, from the thematic point of view, are the most first-target point of UST's development. Before UST went in for social development, it observed that society is consisted of various interrelated problems where it was not possible to cope with the challenges by a single-handed intervention. Thus UST sets a mission to start from the very deep of the grass root with women in the prime seat to materialize the mission. In this way the question of empowerment for the women is attached to its mission as an imperative theme.

The current program of UST is an advanced form of women empowerment which is designed for development of capacity of women. In addition, this program strengthens regional and national synergies among the stakeholders and participants along with promoting gender responsive political initiatives at different levels of the public administration, in the intervention areas. The activities under this program are focused on different aspects of capacity building for the stakeholders with due consideration of category, social position, nature of roles and responsibilities and the issues that push women to a state of disempowerment. As many as three types of stakeholders the program deals with i.e. a) Right holders- community women, b) Duty bearers- elected members of Union Parishad specially the female members and c) Moral Bearers-civil society people.

The program is now in its fourth year, running with an aim to develop knowledge and capacity of the program participants chiefly community women and elected members of Union Parishad along with the establishment of linkage for regional common interest.

The Regional program to promote gender equality and political participation has multi-faceted dimensions. The program as per plan raises awareness of the community group members, Gram Unnayan Parishad (GUP) - A people's Organization, and streamlines the capacity of the Youth groups with the hope that they will shoulder the responsibility program in the long run. Accordingly their capacity and skills are being developed.



PLANNING AT LOCAL LEVEL

Planning at local level by Right Holders, Moral Bearers and Duty bearers for women empowerment is one that the program has incorporated effectively to help promote capacity of the people. UST organizes meeting as well as workshop at community level with Group members, GUP, UP members and Chairmen. The groups and leaders take part in these meetings. The groups share their problems, chalk out plans and materialize the actions. All the planning meetings have built-in objectives to help the participants acquire knowledge and capacity to understand the prevailing obstacles and the opportunities as well to remove their problems. This is a practical process and it attains the expected outcome. The women put up their demands with the Local Government Institutions and seek for their entitlements.

HUSBANDS ARE MORE A COMPANION THAN A GUARDIAN

It is a common phenomenon in the country that a husband in the rural areas appears with different attributes. Basically they seek to govern the family by dint of their power and contribution as they need. They work outside and the wives work in the houses respectively. Husbands never share work with their respective wives at home. Sometime it leads to discontent between husband and wife. UST takes this issue with great interest and has included an intervention under this program to create a good atmosphere in the family by building a pleasant understanding between husband and wife. It is also evident that gender relations in Bangladesh have been undergoing a process of considerable transformation over the last two decades as part of broader process of economic transition and social change. Women now work outside and contribute to the family. Women's changing roles have given rise to a range of new dimensions in the case of live and livelihoods but they still lag in capacity to take decision in the family, society as well.

UST with a view to developing a good relationship and capacity, organizes residential training for both husbands and wives together. Both husbands and wives (Couple) attend in pairs in this training. This is new of its kind and it gives ample room to the respective



husbands and wives to think discuss on their roles and maintain a good partnership sharing works in the families respectively.

The training being termed as Pair training encompasses a number of sessions on different subjects. Mainly the subjects cover gender and development, Gender-specific roles and responsibilities, women rights and entitlements, Equality and Equity, Gender role and needs, CEDAW, functions of GUP and rights. The training has laid great impact in the society. Husbands know of gender role, strategic gender needs and that the women should also enjoy rights in the similar fashion. After this training the husbands become companion, a true life partner, and not a torturing guardian.

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY OF UP

Union Parishad is one of the major stakeholders as it is already unveiled. UST undertakes different programs



for building capacity of Union Parishad with special focus to the elected female members. UST organizes training for the duty bearers (The elected female members) to make them know of their roles and responsibilities and entitlements. Simultaneously UST activates the standing committees, holds meetings on regular basis on different issues partly for raising their awareness and partly for regularizing their actions. The meetings help committees become more dynamic and pro-active.

TRAINING ON CONSTITUTION OF BANGLADESH AND WORLD HUMAN RIGHTS

As an integral part of the program, UST organizes training for the Right Holders, Duty bearers on the constitution of Bangladesh. The training has been very effective for the target people. They learn about constitution, constitutional rights, human rights and entitlements.

Apart from Constitution, UST organizes several other trainings for the Right holders and Duty bearers on:

- Violence against Women, Networking and Leadership
- Women rights, Gender and CEDAW
- Electoral Process and Voter Rights
- Gender and Development
- Leadership and Communication
- Leadership and Women Empowerment

AWARENESS THROUGH DAY OBSERVANCE

A) WORLD DAY AGAINST CHILD LABOR

UST celebrates on the occasion of different days under the program. Day observance is one of the major activities taken for raising awareness and strengthening the voice of the people. UST observes the days together in the name of 16-Day observance. The 16-day program comprises of the observance of national and international days. The World day against child labor is one of those days being observed under this program to raise awareness of children on their rights and

entitlements. To mark the significance of the day UST organizes colorful Rally, seminar etc. Many distinguished guests including Upazila vice Chairman, Local Administration, LGI representative community leaders, fathers/guardians attend in the rally and speak on this occasion. The activity lays impact in the society. This activity has made the fathers/guardians more heedful about child education as rights and they send their girls and boys to school.

B) SAFE MOTHERHOOD DAY

The Safe Motherhood Initiative was instigated by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international agencies in 1987. UST combines this initiative in program and celebrate with colorful gesture taking it as a means to increase knowledge of mother about this day which is obviously a new as well as an indispensable event for the people. The theme of the last event organized in 2012 is 'ENSURING QUALITY SERVICES FOR SAFE MOTHERHOOD'. In this day, the mothers brings out a Rally in the community with Festoons and Banner with due inscription of the message of the day and hold discussion on maternal and child health, scopes, their entitlements in this regard. This program has helped the poor women find out the services they should obtain from the government for pre and post natal care of pregnant women.

C) INTERNATIONAL WOMEN DAY

UST celebrates international women day on 8 March in the field and central office as an integral component of the program. Different activities like rally, discussions and opinion sharing programs are held under this program. The community women and children bring



out Rally in the morning chanting slogans on child rights. Rally is followed by sagacious discussion by participants and other invited guests in a well organized meeting. The community leaders, CSO leaders, representatives from Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad take part in this program. This program has opened a great opportunity for the women and children to learn the significance of the day and speak on this occasion. Ultimately it will lay impact on their family.

D) STRENGTHENING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY AMONG UNION PARISHAD LEADERS AND MEMBERS

Accountability and transparency are two basic words that UST takes care off by its policy and established systems of management, administration for all the projects. UST has many a committee at central as well as in the fields to ensure these. In this project, UST works closely with Union Parishad. Primary intention behind this work is to enhance their capacity, transparency in works and accountability, commitment to their responsibilities. Union Parishad is one of the major stakeholders. UST has taken this program for the benefit of rural poor people, women. UST organizes meeting, discuss several issues and impart training to make the Union Parishad representatives understand their particular roles and responsibilities, the services that Union Parishad should render to the people. Likewise, UST organizes meeting for local people to let them know of what their right is, on the one hand, and the way they will seek for assistance. This process help create a platform for the community women to pressurize the union Parishads for services.

ENSURED SERVICES THROUGH INCREASED COLLABORATION

UST believes in collaboration for the sustainability of the program. Thus UST, under this project takes initiative to increase linkage, collaboration among the stakeholders from the belief that if the collaboration is strengthened, services are ensured. In this respect, UST organizes several meetings at UP level. UP elected members, Chairman and secretaries take part in these meetings. UST's frontline staff facilitate these sessions. Among other topics, the issues of good governance, service

delivery system and democracy among UP members and local people are the significant subject matters of discussion. Together with all participants prepare community-based action plans. By these collaboration meetings UST makes the participants conversant about the works of Union Parishad where community participation is needed. Local people and UP members share their opinions and therefore a mutual respect and coordination is established for the benefit of the program participants.

SENSITIZATION MEETING AT UP LEVEL

UST organizes meeting in the Union Parishad to create awareness of the participants so that they are able to understand their rights specially political rights, identify their women's political rights, develop knowledge in electoral process and women's role in the electoral process.



STRENGTHENING UNION PARISHAD (UP) STANDING COMMITTEE

Union Parishads comprise of several standing Committees created for different services to the community. Primarily UST works with Union Parishad and its standing committees on various development agenda. UST holds discussion with the Union Parishad and activate the committees where there is no committee or the existing committees are not in operation. UST reorganize the standing committees and activate them, build capacity of the committee and make them pro-active to render proper services.

YOUTH FORUMS: THE WATCHDOG IN THE COMMUNITY

UST has formed several Youth forums at all the wards of the working Union consisting of both girls and boys from the respective Wards. Each Youth Forum consists of 11 members. Among them one is leader. The prime aim



of formation of Youth Forum is to accumulate voices of community to central level. Youths work in their respective community for protection of VAW, early marriage and social problems. These Youths work in a group and also individually. They act with their vigil eyes in the community so that the people do not become victim (women) of evil practice. Upon hearing news whatsoever, incidence they rush to the spot and settle feud having discussed with the local people specially the families in problem. The Youth Forum's members assist victims for obtaining legal aid support.

The Youth Forum works in the community as watchdog and looks after all the evils with watchful eyes. The Youths hold meeting on monthly basis and prepare action plan. They review the plan in and assess progress in their monthly plans. Youth Forum members monitor Union Parishad and assist Union Parishad in preparing plans. The program finds the possibility of making the program sustained through the Youth Forums. In this regard, UST strengthens their capacity and plans to run the Youth Forum under a constitutional framework.

COMMUNITY-GUIDED GENDER RESPONSIVE BUDGET (GRB)

Gender responsive budget (GRB) is a current concern of national government in Bangladesh. At union level, GRB is still a novel issue. UST has taken this issues and organize meeting every year at Kochukata union- the working union before the process starts to take place. Women, UP members take part in this meeting. UST also holds pre-budget consultation meeting. UST facilitates this program. The participants identify specific areas of activities with special focus on the women. This is participatory event where the women raise their problems and needs and claim for allocation.

Prior to preparation of budget, UST organizes a meeting at community level to make the Moral bearers, duty bearers and Right Holders aware about their rights and the services they are entitled to receive. This activity helps increase knowledge about GRB and capacity by which they claim for inclusion of their demands. Finally the activity is raised in the meeting, the demanded things are accepted. Accordingly the Chairmen and members are committed to concentrate on women's prioritized issues and include in the budget.



'NO ONE CAN PREVENT ME FROM SENDING MY CHILDREN TO SCHOOL'

Forty four years old Rahima Begum was born in a poor family at Kochukata union. She is known as Rahima Bubu in her village. Rahima faced double burden since she came of a poor family and at the same time, she was a poor woman. She said **'becoming a woman is a curse'**. For poverty Rahima had to pass very hard days. Hardly had she taken three meals a day during her childhood. Parents would send her and her brother to a school together yet in most of the time she was not encouraged. Religious prejudice is also another hindrance that caused Rahima to abstain from attending the School. Her father would try to pacify her in different ways to make her refrain from going to school. Sometime, her father would become enraged when Rahima would become more interested to go to school.

Rahima was the victim of early marriage. She would not even know of marriage. Despite ignorance she had to say yes and accept marriage at an early age. Married to a day labor, Rahima live in a joint family. She would perform all the household chores without any rest. Moreover, she had accommodated with the culture and practices of new family and made all people feel at home. She had to give up the bed with sun rise and work till midnight ensuring meals for all family members every day. In that time it was easy for her to do all those things in one hand as she was too young to manage all these jobs then.

Now Rahima is a leader of a Group under this program. It has been a pleasant experience for her as she expresses. Following motivation and inspiration of UST's community workers, she formed a Shamity (group) named Agrani Mahila Samity (Women's organization) with other poor women. They desired to eliminate hunger, diseases, malnutrition and poverty from their society. Rahima became the treasurer of that Samity. They arrange weekly meeting and mobilize weekly savings. These meetings help them identify problems, prioritize issues and necessary interventions. These women also attended in several training sessions organized by UST. She knows of her position, even though she has not received formal education she has come to know of the value of knowledge, education through different training, awareness-raising sessions and other programs organized by UST in this program. She feel it as her most coveted pride and she says that she has been deprived by her parents but she will not deprive her daughter of higher education. "Anyway I shall send my daughter to school for education. I come to know of my rights for the program that I can give opinion in my family for any issues of development, child care and overall perfection in the family. I think I can persuade my husband and I consider it as my empowerment.



Rahima is now recognized and honored by the villagers. She presides over meeting. Sometimes women come to her for taking advice. After the position of treasurer for sometime, Rahima has been elected as the Chair of Gram Unnayan Parishad (GUP). Now she is more responsible to bring about a change in the society for these rural women. She will work for making the village groups more functional, cooperative and dynamic. She will lunch campaign against dowry, early marriage, divorce and polygamy and develop a sustainable movement for stopping domestic violence.

She still faces problem. Her husband does not like her going outside. Frequently he scolds her. Her husband does not want his daughter to school, but she proudly has said "No one can prevent me from sending my daughter to school". She admits that all she has leaned is contribution of the program of UST. Now her husband observes his wife's popularity and acceptance in the community, society and feels proud

GRAM UNNAYAN PARISHAD (GUP) - an ultimate body of empowered women

Formation of GUP is UST's mission-bound activity. It evolves through a systematic process that works as a people's organization and an empowered women's body at union level. GUP consists of eleven members, elected through direct poll by advance leaders, these are empowered women. GUP works as a people organization that is parallel to Union Parishad. In particular UST facilitates the development and promotion of leadership among the women by forming the GUP, the ultimate platform of community people. These women leaders of GUP participate in local Salish, village court. They communicate with local government and put up demands on behalf of the community. They raise savings and mobilize resources for development. GUP members works in the direction of achieving gender justice, involve in various social works like protest and movement against child marriage, dowry practice and polygamy.

VIDEO SHOW: A WAY TO SENSITIZATION

UST under this program organizes Video show on different issues. Men, women and children watch the shows. Issues are chosen keeping consistency with the goal and objectives of the program and needs of the community. The shows are organized in the community to enhance people's knowledge. People learn and get entertained. Women learn watching the performance; become more insightful, alert against inequality, injustice and Violence.



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