

Violent acts against women and children are a major concern. Institutionalized cultural values, religious beliefs, and low socioeconomic status leave women with little protection and few avenues of redress. Poverty, political unrest, and economic crises are all associated with increasing levels of violence against women, and there is little acceptance that it constitutes a violation of their human rights. Police and courts may be reluctant to become involved viewing such violence as a domestic matter outside their jurisdictions. Domestic violence has attendant, serious health problems, and the victim's participation in social, economic, and political life is often severely curtailed. Furthermore, entrenched gender norms mean that both men and women may be unwilling to speak about gender violence. It is here that women's NGOs can play an important role in advocacy, support, education, and lobbying for legislative change.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

A bronze sculpture of three women in a supportive embrace, set against a background of flowing white fabric and faint text overlays. The sculpture is the central focus, with the women's forms rendered in a dark, textured metal. They are positioned in a way that suggests mutual support and solidarity. The background features large, flowing white fabric that creates a sense of movement and light. Faint, semi-transparent text overlays are visible, including the words 'violation of human rights', 'success', 'support', 'experiences', and 'violence'.

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ADVOCACY, EDUCATION, AND SUPPORT

Few donors have the organizational capacity to directly address grassroots advocacy, education, and support for female victims of violence. Women's NGOs, on the other hand, have proven to be more successful in providing support to victims because of their experiences in dealing with the practical, structural, and cultural barriers faced by poor women. Mukti Nari O-Shishu Kalayan Shangstha (Bangladesh), the Center for the Development of Women's Resources (Indonesia), and the Women's Psychological Rehabilitation Center (Tajikistan) used their expertise in this area to develop new mechanisms for educating and supporting poor female victims of violence.

advocacy



Preventing Violence against Women and Children— *Mukti Nari O Shishu Kalyan Shangstha, Bangladesh*

The growing number of violent acts against women and children—including acid throwing, rape, trafficking, and other sexual violence—is of great concern to women's NGOs and to other organizations in Bangladesh. The frequency of such violence is evidence that the law and the police force do not offer sufficient protection. Poverty, low literacy, and lack of awareness of their legal rights work against women seeking redress through these formal channels. Access to the courts and the police is further limited by their male-dominated hierarchies and the discriminatory practices embedded in these institutions. Women in the poverty-stricken district of Kushtia in western Bangladesh—a district used as a route for trafficking women and girls through the southwest border of the country—are particularly vulnerable. Few of them have the resources to access police protection or legal remedies.

The Kushtia-based NGO, Mukti Nari O Shishu Kalyan Shangstha (Mukti) has first-hand experience with the barriers poor women face in gaining access to the police and to judicial systems. Since its inception in 1990, Mukti has provided legal aid to female victims of violence and injustice, particularly in the areas of sexual violence, divorce, dowry, early marriage, and polygamy. Members of Mukti have witnessed at close hand increases in trafficking and in violence as a result of rising dowry expectations. The executive director is a female lawyer who can navigate formal legal and police proceedings as well as traditional mediation practices (*shalish*).

With funding from ADB under RETA 5889, Mukti was able to strengthen its relationship with important local stakeholders including the courts, the police, the media, lawyers, government officials, and women's groups using dialogue, lobbying, research, observation and monitoring, dissemination of information, and training workshops. Through 24 dialogue sessions to raise awareness on the problem of violence against women, Mukti was able to establish relationships with the police superintendent, the civil surgeon, the district women's affairs officer, the district coordinator of nonformal education, and the assistant director of horticulture.



MARRIAGE in Bangladesh is rarely a decision made by the two individuals involved. In general, families arrange them, so when senior family members like the husband's parents disapprove of a marriage, the family will often try to break it up. This is what happened in the case of Asma and Jamil. They had been married for 10 years and had a 7-year-old daughter. Jamil's mother, however, was never happy about the match. Firstly, Asma came from a poor family and did not bring much in the way of a dowry. Secondly, Asma did not have the use of her legs so could not work in the house or in the fields like other wives. For many years, Asma and Jamil lived separately from Jamil's family as his family would not accept Asma. Finally, Jamil was told that he would not inherit any property unless he divorced his wife. Under pressure from his family, he moved back home where he stayed for 4 months. During this time, his family relentlessly pressured him to remarry which he eventually did. However, Jamil refused to consummate the marriage out of respect for Asma. When Asma went to visit Jamil at his family's home, she was beaten by his brother and his brother's wife. Asma reported this to the police, but they were reluctant to get involved in what they saw as a domestic dispute. Someone at the police station suggested she try Mukti.

In situations like this one, Mukti staff members use traditional mediation known as shalish. Mukti brings together all the parties involved along with a few socially respected leaders. Shalish allows grievances to be aired frankly and seeks to reach a settlement on the basis of socially accepted values. It relies on the very public nature of any agreement to ensure people live up to any commitments made. Usually an agreement is reached after several meetings. In this case, social norms supporting marriage, particularly when a child is involved, were brought into play to pressure Jamil's family to accept his marriage to Asma.

As a result of shalish, Asma and Jamil are living together again and his family has agreed not to disinherit him. His second wife continues to live with her parents as Jamil's new father-in-law is demanding money for a divorce. Mukti is also dealing with this issue in order to free Asma from the status of co-wife.

Following the dialogues, Mukti was invited to become a member of Kushtia's Committee on Violence Protection and received letters of support from the civil surgeon and the police superintendent to observe and monitor cases registered at hospitals and police stations. Officers in six police stations allowed Mukti staff to observe cases in their jurisdictions, and two Mukti staff members visited the general hospital and six health clinics to monitor cases and treatment of victims of rape and torture. As a result, Mukti was able to compile a database on the incidence and handling of cases in local hospitals and police stations.



protection

A total of 1136 women and children were admitted to hospital during the project. Of those, 244 were victims of assault, and 339 were victims of violence perpetrated by their husbands. Poisoning accounted for a further 290 cases. Two Mukti field staff analyzed 34 court cases including 6 of kidnapping, 8 of rape, 3 murder cases, and 9 cases of torture. Mukti has used the data in its awareness raising campaigns, in workshops and dialogue sessions, for policy making, and for reporting on the incidence and nature of violence against women in the Kushtia area. While the data are likely to be grossly underreported, they nevertheless provide an important baseline.

Eighteen training workshops were also conducted during the project. Approximately 150 women activists and social workers participated in six, 2-day workshops on issues such as women's rights, the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), gender, and violence. A further 180 journalists, development workers, and social leaders attended six workshops directed at raising community awareness on the extent and nature of violence against women and on the rights of women and children. In addition, a further 180 government officials and police personnel participated in six workshops on women's and children's legal rights, the status of women in society, the nature and extent of violence against women, and the responsibility of government and police to prevent and prosecute violent crimes against women and children.

RUPA was a young bride of 16 when her husband sold her into trafficking. He was linked to a gang involved in supplying brothels in Dhaka. When Rupa's parents found out that she was missing, they contacted Mukti because they were worried that the police would demand money to find their daughter.

According to Rupa's mother, Rupa's recovery would not have been possible without Mukti's assistance. In particular, Mukti's good relationship with the district police and judiciary meant that the police speedily responded to the case. The police later arrested Rupa's brother-in-law, but her husband escaped, and Rupa's parents did not have the resources to press charges or to pursue the matter further. In the end, they settled on a divorce.

Mukti's also helped Rupa's settle back into local society. In conservative, rural Bangladesh, women risk social ostracism if associated with prostitution and other illicit sexual relations. When Rupa first returned, there were numerous rumors suggesting that she had in fact been working as a prostitute during the time she was held in protective custody in Dhaka. Mukti arranged for Rupa to make a signed statement to the contrary in front of a local magistrate that was verified by the police in Dhaka. These documents were then presented at several meetings with community leaders in order to re-establish her reputation.

Mukti also prepared a number of posters, booklets, leaflets, and press statements as part of its commitment to raising local awareness. Three press conferences attended by 71 journalists resulted in a number of articles in local newspapers on the need to combat violence against women and children.

awareness



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Workshops on Violence Against Women for Grassroots Women's Groups—Centre for Women's Resources Development (PPSW), Indonesia

Violence against women has become a major concern in Indonesia especially in the last 5 years. Recent economic and political crises have brought tensions to the surface and have resulted in growing numbers of rapes and incidents of sexual harassment and abuse both inside and outside the home. Exacerbating this situation is the general crisis in law and order that has dramatically reduced legal and police protection for women. Furthermore, cultural values often condone violence, particularly domestic violence. There is still little acceptance that domestic violence is a crime and a violation of a woman's human rights. Consequently, police and others are reluctant to get involved, and many victims would rather conceal such crimes because they are ashamed.

ALL but 5 of the 170 workshop participants stated they had either witnessed or been the victims of violence. In fact, 85% stated they were actually the victims. While wife-abuse was the most common form of violence reported, they were the least likely to acknowledge or talk about it because of the prevailing cultural belief that it is a private and family matter. Participants also reported violence against children and teenagers and incidences of sexual harassment. The information gathered at the workshop was fed into the design of training materials and action plans to combat this growing problem.



In 2003, the national government announced a policy of zero tolerance toward violence against women to be accompanied by educational programs, public awareness campaigns, and legislative reform. While commendable, such efforts cannot combat entrenched attitudes that subordinate women and the taboos against publicly discussing violent crimes against them. The Centre for the Development of Women's Resources (PPSW) is currently assisting over 100 community-based groups covering approximately 4,500 people in 11 districts in 4 provinces (DKI-Jakarta, West Java, Riau, and West Kalimantan) to combat violence against women. Of those groups, 98% are women's organizations.

With ADB assistance, PPSW initiated a grassroots campaign to develop a training module targeting violence against women. The module was designed to both improve understanding of violence against women and to devise strategies to combat it. Workshop participants shared and analyzed various methods and survival strategies, developed flexible training modules and action plans to build support networks, and developed a model for future grassroots campaigns. Six training workshops were conducted as part of the project. Initially, a workshop was held for 23 participants from PPSW partner institutes from five regions. Subsequently, five regional workshops were conducted in West Java, West Kalimantan and Riau training an additional 170 women. PPSW estimates that over 10,000 people will benefit from this training as the participants disseminate their knowledge and prevention strategies to their families, their communities, and to other women's groups in their areas.

community



The development of a flexible training module was an important outcome of the project. It was designed to be easily adapted to the needs and backgrounds of participants. For example, information on government policy can be provided simply in the form of cartoons and diagrams or more technically with reference to specific legal actions. Case studies can be drawn directly from newspapers or can be simplified as required

Another important outcome was the development of action plans. Strategies discussed in the plans included community education, information dissemination (brochures and posters), and social mobilization. There were also calls from the participants in the six workshops to develop sustainable, community-based crisis centers and to run more grassroots workshops using the training module. To realize this objective, PPSW is paying for materials for the women trained in the five regional workshops to adapt the module for their own organizations as well as leaders of other women's groups in their regions.

Women's Crisis Centers— Women's Psychological Rehabilitation Center, Tajikistan

Civil war and political conflict have disastrous, long-term economic and social costs as the women and children of Tajikistan well know. The country's 5-year conflict (1992–1997) left a legacy of 50,000 deaths, 600,000 displaced persons, 60,000 refugees, 55,000 orphans, and 20,000 widows out of a population of fewer than 6 million. Violence against women and girls during the conflict psychologically damaged both women and men, and continues today as post-conflict trauma and in response to continuing economic and social frustration. Ministry of health statistics suggest that 70% of depressed women live in a condition of acute or chronic family stress.

In affiliation with the Association of Women Scientists of Tajikistan, the Women's Psychological Rehabilitation Center in Dushanbe has worked to support victims of violence, the majority of whom are women and girls. ADB support enabled the Center to broaden the extent and reach of its services by establishing women's crisis centers in Kofarnikhon, Kurgan-Tube and Tursun-Zade. Through hotlines and educational programs designed to raise their self-confidence and self-esteem, these centers provide women and teenagers counseling and other assistance; referrals to lawyers, psychologists, psychotherapists, and gynecologists; and reproductive health and family planning services.

Difficult or complex cases were referred to lawyers, psychologists, psychotherapists, and gynecologists for individual consultation. Many of these involved women who had been exposed to long-term domestic violence. In addition, 3 support groups met for 3 hours a week over a 3-month period. The majority of participants were victims of domestic violence though some were victims of sexual violence. Many women reported that due to their participation in these groups they were able to recover their self-esteem and to become socially active again.

THE telephone hotlines at the crisis centers saw plenty of action. During the 12-month project period, 900 women were assisted.. The majority (60%) were married women aged 20–45 with children. Their problems stemmed from psychological and physical abuse and included post-traumatic stress, depression, phobias, lack of self-esteem, and withdrawal from social activities. Most (65%) had suffered psychological violence from husbands or partners; 48% concerned domestic violence; over 30% had experienced a complex mix of physical and psychological abuse. To staff the hotline, 15 women received 2 days of intensive training at each of the 3 branch crises centers.

Educational programs included three seminars for teenagers on the morals and sexes at the Kofarnikhon, Kurgan-Tube and Tursun-Zade centers. In addition, 30 young women and men received training in reproductive health, moral and legal education, cultural and ethical considerations, and the interrelationship between family and society. The center also conducted workshops in all three branches entitled “You are not Alone,” “A Life Free of Violence,” and “Under the Protection of International Rights.” A total of 90 participants attended at each center including housewives, high school students, and social workers. Participants found these workshops to be very informative.

Trafficking of women and girls in South Asia is a major concern. As a cross-border issue, it cannot be addressed by one country alone; dialogue and cooperation across boundaries are essential. Partnerships and cooperation are needed among countries, governments, and NGOs to formulate a coordinated, regional approach to curb this venal trade. The Centre for Legal Research and Resource Development held a meeting of regional representatives in Kathmandu, Nepal to share experiences, problems, and strategies and to expedite action by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Regional Convention against trafficking.

**Regional Meeting
on Preventing Trafficking—
Center for Legal Research and Resource
Development, Nepal**

In the past decade, over 200,000 Nepali girls and women have been smuggled to India and beyond for labor or for the sex trade. The clandestine nature of trafficking makes it difficult to obtain accurate figures, but estimates suggest it is on the increase. Poverty and the lack of income-earning opportunities for women and girls have increased the pool of recruits. Many women and girls are lured by promises of jobs and marriage. Even family members and friends can be part of the recruiting system. In Nepal, female virginity is highly valued at marriage, so trafficking makes its victims undesirable mates. This means that women may be forced by economic necessity into prostitution later in life if they were earlier raped or sold.

I am very glad that I have been directed to this crisis center. The nine meetings [I have attended] have passed very fast. Certainly, not all my problems are solved, but I have at least seen them from another point of view. I now understand the direction in which I need to work. (participant, women’s support group).

I now understand that there is a lot of violence [in our society], and that I have the right to voice my objection both in my relations with my relatives and with men. (crisis center volunteer)

trafficking



The low economic and social status of women in Nepal creates the conditions under which trafficking, gender violence, and prostitution “by choice” occur. For widowed, divorced, or abandoned women, prostitution may be the only way to earn a living. Violence against girls and women from husbands and from household, and community members has also been identified as a significant push factor for women to leave home making them potentially vulnerable to trafficking. High rates of illiteracy, poor health, and limited access to resources for females are evidence of entrenched gender inequality in Nepali society. Women’s low status reinforces ineffective government policies and lax prevention of trafficking by police. Even worse, victims are often penalized instead of the traffickers or their clients.



Government and nongovernment organizations have been slow to adopt a coordinated, regional approach to curb cross-border trafficking involving more than one national jurisdiction. For this reason, the center brought together such organizations from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sweden, and Thailand in Kathmandu for a regional consultation meeting on the prevention of human trafficking. The primary objectives were to facilitate networking and coordination among governments and NGOs for a regional response to trafficking, to expedite the adoption of the SAARC regional convention against trafficking, and to identify mechanisms for rescuing victims.

PARTICIPANTS at the regional meeting identified the following priorities for action:

- cooperation among organizations working in trafficking origins and destinations;
- cooperation between organizations and border police;
- greater awareness among parents about how to protect their children and about the rights of their children;
- increased awareness of trafficking among school children, teachers, and other members of society;
- counseling parents on how to reintegrate their daughters into society.

The need to sensitize the police, the judiciary, and the media was particularly stressed.

A special feature of the meeting was the inclusion of local participants, representatives from paralegal committees active in affected districts, school teachers, and elected representatives from local government. The paralegal women contributed experiences gained from building the “Community Surveillance System against Trafficking,” a project designed and implemented by the centre in the previous 7 years. The paralegals so impressed representatives from Bangladesh that the surveillance system will be implemented in that country also.

The need for a clear working definition of trafficking was stressed because many definitions are vague, ambiguous, and “offender friendly.” The need to take seriously the human rights violations of victims was also stressed. This would include the removal of laws that directly or indirectly discriminate against women and children, adequate representation of victims in court, and protection of victims of trafficking from exposure to public humiliation.

As a cross-border issue, trafficking of women and girls in South Asia cannot be addressed by one country alone; dialogue and cooperation across boundaries are essential.

Conference participants charted recommendations for future action in three categories:

- strengthening information networks by collecting data on missing persons and identifying traffickers, susceptible communities, trafficking routes, likely times and seasons, and methods;
- strengthening coordination for protecting vulnerable girls and women by networking at the state (district), national, and regional levels; communicating and getting feedback at the grassroots, national, and regional levels; translating information; and establishing resource centers.
- advocating to prevent regional trafficking by forming national and international taskforces; including human rights organizations in NGO national taskforces; including SAARC representatives on the regional taskforce; and reviewing and monitoring national trafficking action plans.



These recommendations are to be realized through a variety of measures including networking in SAARC, collecting and compiling data, establishing a regional court to handle trafficking issues through the SAARC secretariat/offices in each country, and employing special police to deal with trafficking. The participants also recommended actions to combat negative cultural values that promote trafficking or that blame victims. It was suggested that this could be achieved through movies, street plays, songs, radio, speeches, and meetings.