



# Equality vs privilege

## Engage men, change them

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

IN our society, men are overwhelmingly found as perpetrators in violence against women (VAW) cases. They are socialized to be violent, and this male violence produces and reproduces patriarchal norms and practices that ignore and even encourage men's violence against

UNFPA, has taken a well-timed initiative to involve young men and boys to self-reflect on gender violence and begin to change the social attitude of the next generation of men in Bangladesh. Primarily they are targeting young students and rural communities.

The initiative utilizes the Community Dialogue Facilitation Tool on Masculinities and issues related to



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women. So to tackle male violence we need to reach out to them and involve them in policies and programmes. In addition, there are a 'silent' majority of men who are against any sort of VAW, and the number of men actively involved in promoting gender parity is ever increasing. A sensitized man can be a father, brother or husband who himself does not commit VAW and actively participate in eradicating VAW.

The MoWCA, with technical and financial support from

violence against women and girls which was created in order to challenge traditional views on women's rights by focusing on self-reflection and teaching young men that gender violence and inequality is hurtful to both men and women as sometimes, young men do not want to engage in supposed masculine activities such as fighting and taunting, but are forced to do so in order to be seen as masculine. It allows young men to be themselves without feeling pressured from society and to speak out against gender violence.

## Religious leaders spreading awareness on and eradicating VAW

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

IN our society, violence against women (VAW) is deeply rooted in the culture and moral dimensions of the members where impetuosity of authoritarian power and physical force prevails over justice and equality. Against this background legal and institutional reforms alone can do little because these address only the manifested

against women. In Bangladesh where fatwa related VAW cases are rampant, such progressive role of the religious leaders can be a change maker.

Taking this into account, UNFPA and Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) conducted training for religious leaders. It focused on institutionalising behavioural change and targets powerful opinion makers which in Bangladesh, are often religious leaders. Under this programme,

and Buddhist community in Bangladesh respectively, and operates under MoRA. In addition to Muslim religious leaders, MoRA conducted training programmes to develop and enhance the awareness of social and religious leaders of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim communities on reproductive health, motherhood, gender issues, dowry, HIV/AIDS, and other important women's rights issues.

During the training programme, 1,980 religious leaders, including 1,710 Imams were trained and their capacity developed in terms of addressing VAW. Nine interfaith dialogues were organized in seven Divisions, Cox's Bazaar, and Bogra District with participants from different religious organizations to address the prevention of violence against women from a religious point of view. Discussing and understanding masculinity and engaging young adolescents and boys in the programme have been extremely successful and an effective tool and has been incorporated into nearly every programme.

Ministry of Religious Affairs expressed enthusiasm in having all Imams, especially in the field, trained on gender sensitivity and gender based violence. Findings from a field visit jointly conducted by MoRA and UNFPA indicated that the community at large are learning about the negative effects of gender violence from their religious leaders during religious gatherings. As well as being respected members of the community and having the capacity to deeply impact Bangladeshi society, religious leaders can continue to change the social behaviour of Bangladesh's citizens in terms of combating violence against women and girls.



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Imams participating in a group discussion on eradicating VAW.

crimes, not the embedded causes. Therefore, to eradicate the epidemic of VAW our ethical and moral values need to be upheld. Our religious leaders and institutions can play a great role in this regard. Masjid, Mandir and other religious institutions are such public spaces where a sensitised religious leader can deeply stir public awareness on violence

religious leaders from different parts of the country have been trained to create an enabling society through interfaith dialogues and community meetings to address and prevent gender based violence.

The Hindu Religious Welfare Trust (1893) and the Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust (1984) were established for the wellbeing of the Hindu

TAMANNA KHAN

"Why do you want separate seats when you talk about men-women equality?" is the comment we often hear, whenever an argument arises in public buses regarding the allocation of seats for women.

The answer lies in the day-to-day incidents of harassment we face as women irrespective of our age. A few days back on my way to work from an assignment I had no choice but to get on an already over-crowded Bangladesh Road and Transport Corporation (BRTC) double-decker bus. Let alone the nine designated seats, there were no place even to stand on the aisle. Burrowing my way through the crèches of human wall formed by men at the gate of the bus, I found a footing near the stairs.

However, after a while I was forced to look for an alternative place to stand for almost every male passenger who came down the stairs would invariably brush by, making me extremely self-conscious of my body. Perhaps not all of them had bad intention tucked up in their sleeves the experience nevertheless was not pleasant.

Inappropriate behaviour by men is something almost all women who travel in public bus in Bangladesh faces. Even a seat does not guarantee a harassment free travel. A colleague shares her experience in a public bus. "There was a forty plus man with his hands crossed over his chest sitting beside a teenage girl, who sat next to me in the front seat of the bus near the windshield. When the girl kept on moving over to my side, I noticed that he was touching her with his fingers. I sternly told him to move away but he ignored me," she said.

In most of these situations we, women, do not protest because there is no visible proof of the harassment. The perpetrator can always bring up the excuse that the 'touching', 'brushing', or 'poking' was an unintentional accident and in most cases, he gains support from other men inside the bus in his argument. "If you are so sensitive, why do you even ride a public transport," are comments most of us have heard when we protested against harassment.

So what did government do --- allocate seats for women, children and disabled people. But that does not prevent the harassment at the time of getting into and out of the bus. Bus helpers would grab our upper arm to pull us, the apparent weak-being, inside the vehicle. Even though there are empty seats at the back of the bus some men would crowd the front aisle pressing against our face with their back or front unless we move our head and decide to rather rest it on our fellow passenger's shoulder.

To avoid all these, we can choose to travel by the 10 BRTC buses that run in the city for women! A working woman shares her experience of this venture. In her entire eight years of commuting on public buses she traveled in those buses only twice. "Once during a hartal and the



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other time when I had to get off from the bus. I was commuting in for some sort of trouble," she said. In both cases, she had to wait hours before she could sight one women-only bus. "They are irregular, never on time and not well maintained, because on both time I got into one, they broke down thrice."

Treating the problem of harassment of women in public transport by allocating seats or providing women-only transport is a reactive measure not a preventive one. What needs to be addressed is attitudes of men and ensuring there is enough public transport for all. In fact, if the quantity and quality of public transport service can be increased and improved then men who take advantage of crowded buses to harass women would not stand a chance.

THE WRITER IS A REPORTER, THE DAILY STAR.

## Survivors helping themselves

SUMI Akhter of Laksham, Noakhali, at her age of 14, was physically and mentally tortured by her husband and in-laws for not being able to meet up the dowry demand. She informed the incidents and sought support from Upazila Women Affairs Officer and got admitted to the Women Support Center (WSC). Since 2006 these WSCs are being operated by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) supported by UNFPA. In 2011, under GoB-UN collaborated joint programme to eliminate violence against women (JP VAW), the ministry and UNFPA started working in seven districts to provide services to the survivors of VAW and creating an enabling environment to reduce the discriminatory practices between men and women.

At the WSC, along with shelter, legal aid, counseling and other services Sumi was provided training on sewing activities. With the support of Women Training Centre (WTC), (sewing project of Department of Women Affairs), she completed sewing training successfully within 3 months. She filed a case against her husband and got divorced. The support centre collected tk 1, 50,000 from her husband as mohorana (a payment provided by the husband to the wife if the marriage does not work out, the amount of which is decided at the time of marriage) money. She utilized some of the money to purchase a sewing machine to re-establish herself. Now she is self-employed and is also supporting her mother with the money she is earning by sewing.

Under this JP VAW project, MoWCA and UNFPA together are

providing shelter and food, legal aid, psycho-social counseling, life-skill training, emergency medical support, education, recreational support to the survivors of violence against women and girls to make them empowered so that they can re-establish their family, social and economic rights. It also helps to establish linkages with different organizations such as legal based organizations, local administration, Police department, hospitals, clinics,

there was no such holistic support with one survivor with the survivors where they could fight against VAW issues. With support from JP-VAW, collaboration and networking among different sectors increased, helping each other to provide the best services. This Women Support Centers, under Ministry of Women and Children Affairs provides with a footing and mental courage to fight against VAW together.

Because of the project's initia-



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NGOs to create a supportive environment to reduce the discriminatory practices and provide support to the survivors of VAW and girls.

Before this JP VAW, women and girls were not able to come forward to speak against the perpetrators, as

tives, a good linkage has been established with different sections i.e. with the local administration, organizations, hospitals, law enforcing agencies etc. All of their supports are crucial to get back survivors voices in the family and in the society.