

NATIONAL DIGITAL DATABASE ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICES

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The main objective of this dialogue is to share the structure of the proposed national digital database on Violence Against Women (VAW). Let us discuss the mechanisms, the need and how we can formulate a nationwide database. The purpose will be to help create a real-time database so that everybody – service providers, victims and women in general can have access.

Meher Afroze Chumki, State Minister, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs

In the present social situation, today's topic is very important. Our observation is that the pattern of VAW varies a lot with new patterns emerging from time to time. We usually get scattered information on this issue, so it is difficult to get the real picture. It is important for us all to know what type of violence is taking place in which localities as well as the ages of the victims.

We are making preparations to build a digital database under MoWCA with the help of UNDP and BRAC. As Chairman, I was vocal on VAW issues in the parliamentary standing committee on Women and Children Affairs. Today, I am here to listen to your suggestions and guidance towards building a national database on VAW.

Majeda Haq, Programme Analyst, Poverty Reduction Cluster, UNDP

The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon is very concerned about the pervasiveness of gender based violence, and has reiterated the need to intensify efforts to eliminate all forms of violence.

As per UNDP's Gender Inequality Index of 2012, Bangladesh ranked 111 out of 186 countries in terms of occurrence of violence. The most recent survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) shows that 87% of married women experienced violence by their husbands. A study by the Bangladesh National Human Rights Commission mentioned that of the 62% of women who were beaten by their husbands and family members, only 18% had accessed the justice system, and 30% did not take any legal step as violence was considered a family matter.

UNDP Bangladesh has implemented a project under the UN Joint Programme on VAW for empowering claimholders and capacitating duty bearers in six districts with BRAC as the field partner. It was found from the experiences of previous projects that victims did not get justice due to ignorance about legal and administrative procedures, lack of accessible forums to report violence with confidence, inactive standing committees and absence of intermediary link support. Therefore, it was necessary to establish effective linkages between victims and service providers and replicate the model at the national level.

We found that many victims did not have information about already existing service facilities. Moreover, service providers do not have adequate information on incidents of VAW. An accurate and comprehensive database is needed to fill this linkage gap. So we started to exchange ideas with MoWCA and relevant stakeholders to prepare a credible and comprehensive national database. We also undertook a mapping and scoping study to facilitate the development of a credible national database.

The Mapping exercise revealed there is a lot of information on VAW available in scattered form. Many organizations maintain their own databases regarding the services they provide without having any central depository on VAW. It is also found that three major sources of information on VAW are: victim or her family, newspaper cuttings and police stations. Most organizations maintain data manually rather than a central digital databank at the national level.

We envision an effective, digitalized and coordinated central database that will connect grassroots level service providers to national level policy makers. We have a three-fold purpose: provide services to victims and follow up, research, and influence policy formulation. The main features of the national database will be: web-based customized software, real-time data inputting, access to VAW service providers with victim-wise tracking mechanisms, follow-up on cases, report and trend analysis, and maintaining confidentiality.

Mahal Aminuzzaman, Senior Programme Officer, Human Rights and Democratization, Royal Danish Embassy

It has been Denmark's pleasure to have been engaged with the government in the long-term multi-sector programme on VAW. The government is in the process of developing a national action plan on VAW, the main aim of which is to foster the participation of the GOs and NGOs and the people at large to promote awareness and enforcement to protect, prevent and reduce VAW. In this regard, I appreciate UNDP's good & timely initiative to come up with a digital database. I suggest that all DP's should consult with MoWCA and relevant line ministries in the design, development and implementation of the action plan as multi-sectoral dimension is very important for addressing VAW.

Ayesha Khanam, President, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad

In addition to the MDGs, it is also important to mention all the previous UN declarations on VAW since the early 90's. In Bangladesh, the women's movement has been taking place since 1980 and has played an important role in combating VAW. From the work experiences of the last three decades, we understand that establishing a credible database is a challenging task; but we will support this initiative as best as we can.

UNDP jointly with The Daily Star under UN Joint Programme on VAW Project organised a Policy Dialogue on "National Digital Database on violence against women: An essential tool for effective services" on June 20, 2013. We publish a summary of the discussions.

--Editor



Dr. Ruchira Tabassum Naved, Scientist, ICDDR

Only few girls and women victims are accessing formal services in this country. We should be aware that we can only reveal the causes of reported violence. We do not know what is happening to the unreported cases of abused women.

The proposed database can benefit from the experiences of other countries. I also think that different experts from IT, database development and VAW should come together to work on this very useful and exciting initiative.

Mohammad Shaheen, Deputy Director, BBS

BBS is mandated to conduct a national survey and Census as per the Statistic Act 2013. One of our major concerns is the confidentiality of data. VAW data collection is difficult (as people are reluctant to disclose the nature of violence suffered); so I suggest starting with severe victims, if you consider covering the whole country. UNDP, MoWCA and relevant stakeholders can work as partners with BBS who can support the VAW database initiative by linking with the national population register.

Rabeya Sultana, Director, Training and Material Development Division, Dhaka Ahsania Mission

We know that a very large number of women suffer from psycho-social violence. It is difficult to report those cases through the formal mechanism, and so a special format for reporting such types of violence should be developed. The same is true for cases that occur in indigenous, religious and professional minority communities. Another important issue is that courts rarely accept statements from victims with speech impairments even though they are able to use sign language.

Selina Ahmed, National Programme Officer, ILO

Before preparing a national database, particular settings of violence such as domestic, work place and educational institutions should be analysed and reflected. We need resource persons who are able to analyse and manage the database. There is a need for national commitment towards this database from all organisations that currently maintain VAW data – MoWCA should play the lead role in this regard.

Advocate Salma Ali, Executive Director, Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers' Association

We should be careful to avoid duplication in data collection. We need strong coordination between the data collectors and service providers. We have to go beyond the project-based to the programme-based approach so that the database can function smoothly despite changes in government and administration.

Ranjan Karmaker, Executive Director, Steps Towards Development (Steps)

'Steps' is currently collecting VAW data from 255 unions of 55 upazilas in 18 districts. The dearth of information about the various dimensions of VAW affects our programme planning. Our findings show that the forms of VAW are changing over time and geographical areas; as well there is no information on the limitations of legal actions. There is a committee called NNPC at the union level maintains a register of VAW cases, but it lacks proper monitoring. If we can reactivate this committee they can be a reliable primary source of reporting. The database should be incorporated in the mainstream programmes of MoWCA to ensure sustainability.

Shamima Begum, Deputy Police Commissioner, Women and Children Investigation Division, Dhaka Metropolitan Police

At the police headquarters, we collect and compile information from the grassroots level. We are also establishing Victim Support Centers all over the country, phase by phase.

Only 5% of the total police force is women. We need at least one woman officer in each police station to ensure women-friendly environments and arrange efficient medical and counseling services for women victims. We urge the government to increase the

number of women police to 10%.

Suparna Roy, Content Coordinator, A2I Programme, Prime Minister's Office

The information collection process proposed for the database should include primary informers from urban areas. There should be a clear mechanism for authentication of the data collected by NNPC at the grassroots level.

Under the A2I Programme we have established Union Information & Service Centers at the union level. These centers are well-equipped and the employees are capable of registering data efficiently. They can help greatly in registering VAW related data, but they will require capacity-building support for data authentication and confidentiality.

Farzana Sultana, Monitoring & Evaluation Coordinator, A2I Programme

We can prepare a harassment map using the database and enforce particular measures for the "red zones". I want to suggest the crowd sourcing model where a woman can immediately report the incident using her mobile phone application without being further harassed, as often occurs while filing reports at the police station.

Mustafizur Rahman, Deputy Secretary (District Judge), Law and Justice Division, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs

The culture of silence among VAW victims is very strong as women wait and compromise until the last moment. When they cannot bear their suffering anymore they inform their elders as a last resort. Very few women seek justice from the court. There is need to improve different existing service providers mechanism UISC, Women Affairs Officers, Social Welfare Officers, District Legal Aid Committee. Besides DLAC, it is also necessary to involve District Bar, Police Stations and NGOs for ensuring victim support service.

Dr. Abul Hossain, Project Director, Multi-Sectoral Programme on VAW, MoWCA

Since 2009, we have been maintaining a database with information collected through police headquarters, hospitals and newspapers. Recently we have done geographical mapping of VAW incidents.

We have to maintain international standard for the proposed database to ensure it is widely accepted. Four categories of violence are clearly mentioned in the Domestic Violence Act 2010: physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence. We shall also have to find out uniform categories from CEDAW and collect information on them so that anyone from anywhere can use and refer to the database.

We must follow some steps to prepare the database such as close scrutiny, authentication or validation, updating and uploading. We shall have to maintain a strong server and technical expertise so that the online database remains safe from any manipulation.

Anna Minj, Director, Community Empowerment Programme, BRAC

The Community Empowerment Programme of BRAC focuses especially on prevention and protection mechanisms to combat VAW starting from awareness raising, rescue, information collection, medical and legal support, rehabilitation and social integration in 55 districts of Bangladesh. In this endeavor to prepare a national database, we should try to link BRAC's ingenious data collection mechanism with the government's existing mechanism. We want to link the victim or survivor to different service providers to help her get comprehensive services.

Under the UNDP VAW project, we have piloted the database in 44 unions of 6 districts where a massive community mobilization programme was undertaken to make people aware about VAW as well as how to report a violence case and get services. Our experiences showed that only 20% of incidents are reported and projecting the 811 cases reported from 44 unions to all Ups, the estimate of incidences is over 100,000. If 100% cases were reported, the figure would be over 500,000. With regard to unreported cases, community mobilization and awareness-raising are

very important as sensitization will support prevention and increase rate of VAW reporting. A real time inputting base database under MoWCA is very much needed, as it will reduce the work load of relevant service providers, enabling them to track cases of individual victims.

Rita Das Roy, Programme Director, Monitoring State Intervention to Combat Violence Against Women, Naripokkho

We work closely with survivors at police stations, hospitals and courts to provide psycho-social counseling support for self-confidence building. It would be important to involve survivors with the data collection mechanism to ensure correct information.

Sara Hossain, Honorary Executive Director, Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust

Besides reporting violence, many women come to seek advice on different matters. It is to be decided who we consider as service seekers.

Since establishing a national database is a challenging task, we should not be too ambitious but rather implement the initiative in phases. It will be important to develop the capacities of relevant officials from the judicial and bar council and relevant GOs and NGOs. UNDP is also doing case tracking with the help of the Chief Justice's office. I think coordination should be maintained between case tracking and the proposed database.

Ayesha Siddika, ADC (HQ), Dhaka Metropolitan Police

Girls aged between 14 and 17 comprise a significant portion of VAW victims. So, the database will not reflect the real picture if we consider VAW victims to be only those whose age is 18 years onwards. We collect realtime data which are directly reported to the police. We can avoid duplication by sharing these data with other stakeholders.

Tariq-ul-Islam, Secretary, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs

In our ministry, we have a Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Protirodh Cell where we collect information from the police headquarters and our administrative channels. But the information comes too slowly to take any effective action. So we have to depend on newspapers. If there is an available real time inputting database, we can get immediate information and receive prompt action from the central government. We can use our adolescent clubs members from 400 unions to collect data on VAW.

Meher Afroze Chumki

Our government has initiated the idea of a 'Digital Bangladesh', which makes initiatives such as a digital database possible. In preparation of a database, we first have to consider what type of data would be collected. We should abide by the National Action Plan for guidance. Newspapers report only severe cases of violence but there are thousands of victims who remain silent. For this reason a database is very important.

Maintaining confidentiality of the victim is crucial, otherwise in our social context victims would face further violation.

We have started a hotline service, but people are still not much aware of it. So we need a massive campaign to take this information to the grassroots level. We should also compile case studies to better understand and respond to VAW incidences.

Above all, we have to focus on education and empowerment of women.

Pauline Tamesis, Country Director, UNDP

Previously, UNDP did not go to any community and discuss domestic violence issues with women. Rather, our projects like REOPA (Rural Employment Opportunity for Public Assets programme) worked to raise their income, raise their voices, and support self-sustainable efforts.

This was done over years to build trust among the women who we were helping to be empowered. And due to the trust built, they came forward to tell us about their core problems. Because of their trust we gained the opportunity to explore beyond economic empowerment to find out what else could be done for sustainability. Preparing a national database on violence against women incidents is a part of that plan.

For us it is not just database or digitizing information, rather it is about ensuring the human rights of women victims by providing access to services, and ultimately access to justice for women who may not otherwise be able to claim their rights.

I would like to conclude with the statement of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon: "There is one universal truth applicable to all countries, cultures and communities: violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable". I think this is a strong guidance, and this is really what drives us to address violence against women.

Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed

We have concluded that the purpose of the database is to make service delivery effective as far as VAW is concerned. I think it is the most important guidance for moving forward.

It is often said that the biggest problem for women is men. It is one of the biggest challenges. We have to devise plans to motivate men and change their attitude towards women.

I want to conclude with this quote (by William James, American psychologist): "A human being can alter his life by altering the attitudes of mind".