



# The Cost of Violence against Women (COVAW) Initiative – a summary of the impact and learning from CARE Bangladesh

## INTRODUCTION

**COVAW- is a unique initiative that explored a new avenue of influencing communities by making convincing arguments of costs and consequences to prevent domestic violence. It attempted to demonstrate to the community that violence against women is not only a women s issue -rather it has consequences for the family, community and the state. The conceptualization of the overall design of Cost of Violence Against Women Initiative grew out of CARE Bangladesh s commitment to women s empowerment programming and in recognition of the context of gender based violence against women and girls.**

The goal of the COVAW project was to prevent violence against women by contributing to behaviour change related to gender norms, practices and behaviours by achieving the following objectives:

- Increase understanding and analysis among communities, NGOs and government about the link between VAW and gender norms, practices and behaviors in marriage.
- Determine the social and economic cost of VAW to individuals, families, communities, and the state, and the cost to development agendas.
- Use evidence on the social and economic cost of VAW to design a behavior and social change campaign, and influence national level policy-makers to build a more enabling environment to prevent VAW.

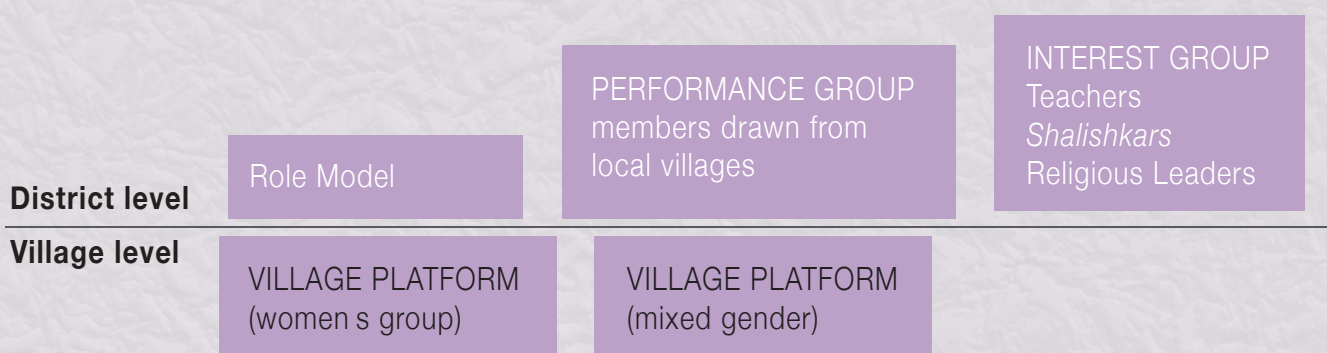


COVAW had community level interventions in three districts-Sunamganj, Dinajpur, and Tangail. It worked with local partners in two of the three Districts: the Society for UDDOG in Dinajpur and Jashis in Sunamganj with direct implementation in Tangail. A third partner South Asia Partnership Bangladesh (SAP-B) was brought in the last year for wider dissemination and awareness raising activities around cost analysis at the Upazilla, District and national level.

## Community Intervention Structure

The central hub of the programme was village level platforms comprising of both male and female members. The project, however, did not create new platforms but rather built on existing platforms that evolved from other CARE projects- like Shouhardo, Protirodh and Arshi. The use of existing platforms in the communities that CARE worked was a conscious choice to reinforce its commitment to move towards a program approach. The village level platforms were facilitated by change facilitators recruited from the community.

Interest groups comprising of teachers, *shalishkars*<sup>2</sup>, religious leaders and opinion leaders along with local resource groups comprising of representatives from other groups and service providers etc were the other groups that were involved in awareness raising activities and supported each other in delivering consistent messages from the project.



## COVAW Process

The COVAW process started with an extensive contextual analysis which included critical incidence analysis and other PLA exercises. This helped to develop a contextual understanding on the gender norms and practices associated with violence against women in different villages and most importantly, ways in which the local power structure operates and influences local justice system.

Staff were provided with extensive training on masculinity and its link to VAW and then subsequently conducted PLA exercises in project sites. Based on the understanding gained from this experience, a process was designed that would gradually increase the awareness of the communities on gender norms and practices and their link to VAW, and motivate communities through cost analysis and behavioural change tools to take action to prevent domestic violence.

<sup>1</sup>. Compiled from original reports of Victor Robinson entitled COVAW Project Final Evaluation and Michael Drinkwater entitled Addressing the heart of the matter: Assessing the effectiveness of platforms used by COVAW to reduce VAW and Scale up Impact in Program Approach (2012)



## Activities

Different activities were designed for achieving the objectives of the project. The description of the main activities is given below:

### Education Sessions

These sessions were designed to increase the understanding of the communities on the link between violence against women and gender norms, practices and behaviors. The sessions included topics on different types of violence against women and its root causes, masculinity and its link to VAW, social and economic cost of violence against women and information on Domestic Violence Act 2010.

### Research, Advocacy and Campaign

#### *Folk Performances*

Local performance groups were developed in each of the three intervention sites. The groups developed dramas, pot songs<sup>3</sup> and songs that conveyed messages on cost and consequences of violence against women and called for community actions to stop violence against women.

#### *Celebrations and Fairs*

COVAW organized public events at both local and national levels. These included celebrations of International Women's Day and events around the 16 days of activism against gender violence campaign. It organized women's development fairs. The fairs created an opportunity to showcase the work of different NGOs on women's development and violence. These fairs created opportunities for the participating organizations to demonstrate women's contribution in development to the community. The organizations also highlighted important areas critical for development of women to the communities. The project used fairs and day celebrations to amplify the voices of positive role models who were using their power for resisting violence against women in the community.



#### *Research on Economic and Social Cost of Violence Against Women*

The project conducted a study to assess the economic cost of violence against women particularly in relation to intimate partner violence for raising awareness and advocating the benefits of preventing domestic violence to the broader society. The study was unique in combining both a bottom-up and top-down approach. First, a household survey was conducted in three intervention sites which examined with victims of domestic violence or their family members individual and family expenses related to the violence. The survey examined costs of domestic violence to both victims and perpetrators. The second study at the institutional level collected data on expenditures of government and non-government organizations on combating VAW. The study findings were shared at district, divisional and national levels with key stakeholders.

2. Shaliskars refer to local arbitrators

3. Pot song is a local form of folk song



In addition to examining the economic cost, it was also important to understand the social cost of domestic violence in order to help develop methodologies to understand both the short-term and long-term social costs better. A study was conducted for this purpose.

### **Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation**

The project instituted a participatory monitoring system at intervention sites. Community members recorded and reported on a number of GBV related events on a quarterly basis. Community members decided among themselves what statistics to track. Common to all three sites were statistics on number of marriages in their community, whether dowry was taken, whether it was an early marriage or polygamous marriage. Different sites also kept records of other community events such as incidents of physical violence to women, women's employment, and shalish cases involving domestic violence.

### **Other activities:**

The other activities included working with *Shalishkars* to ensure justice for the survivors and service providers to link the community platforms with service providers. Specific activities were designed to engage men in discussions about domestic violence and promote behavioural change to reduce intimate partner violence.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS OF COVAW**

COVAW achieved some astonishing results at the village level. The impacts suggest that the model implemented at the village level represents a breakthrough in CARE Bangladesh's gender-based violence programming.

### **Progress towards changing community norms at the grass-root**

The groups at the village level including the community facilitators (CF) demonstrated a high level of awareness on social inequalities between men and women. Generally, the understanding of VAW is limited to physical violence but both the CFs and platforms members showed a high level of awareness on different types violence-physical, sexual, psychological and economic. The understanding was not simply a matter of rote rather the participants demonstrated a nuanced understanding on violence against women.

For instance, examples of mental abuse given by participants included pinching the wife for more food and not wanting pictures with his wife if she is not good looking. The final evaluation of the project concluded that the participants were able to relate what they learnt in education sessions with their real experiences and also showed good understanding on triggers of violence. The following quote illustrates how deeply the programme participants internalized the messages.



*Anything I did that was not according to his will led to violence. He kept a stick at hand to beat me. He had sex with other women but it is I who got accused of infidelity. The violence I have endured was physical, psychological, verbal and sexual. I learned to put words on what he did to me because of COVAW.*



Similarly, the members showed a high level of understanding on different types of costs resulting from VAW. Participants have internalized the cost and consequences of VAW well which was evident as they were able to provide credible detailed financial analysis of cases even though cost analysis differs from one case to another. They also showed a good understanding of social costs like loss of prestige, isolation, break-up of marriage etc. and pointed that social cost is at the root of most significant impact. Most importantly, they recognized the effects of violence against women on village development. Such strong understanding and realization indicates a gradual progression towards change in community norms.

All project sites reported a reduction in physical violence and early marriage. They also reported increased mobility and support for girl's education. There was also strong evidence of changes in *Shalish* practice. Women's participation increased and processes became more gender sensitive which resulted in improving the local justice structure for women. This became possible because of active engagement of the project with *Shalishkars* through different activities. These changes not only indicate behavioural change but also suggest normative changes.

### **Contributing to the discourse on cost of violence against women**

The economic cost analysis done at both community and national levels was thorough in terms of methodology. The national level cost of violence report provided a very credible determination of economic costs. The costing report brought to light the amount of resources that are drained out of poor households to handle cases of domestic violence. It was also able to demonstrate to the policy makers, civil society and the NGOs the cost of domestic violence to the nation. It brought to light the double benefits of preventive efforts- by not having the violence and by having use of the money saved. Both government and the civil society can use the data generated from the study in setting policy advocacy agenda and public campaigns in future. The social cost analysis also provided valuable insights on long term and short term social costs associated with domestic violence. The findings from the study will contribute to broadening the societal understanding of social cost of domestic violence.

## **LEARNING AND FUTURE PROGRAMME IMPLICATIONS**

According to the final evaluation, this work is deserving of serious attention and consideration of replication within Bangladesh in light of its achievement at community level. Several factors contributed in achieving the project objectives. The comprehensive nature of the campaign and COVAW process □ delivering consistent messages in a number of different forms from a number of different actors □ was instrumental to the program's success rather than any outcome resulting from a single activity.

### **Factors that contributed to success at grass-roots**

One of the important factors behind the success is that the costing approach was embraced by the communities with much enthusiasm. It has proven itself as an extremely powerful tool for normative change at the local level in rural Bangladesh. At the community level, the arguments about social costs of violence seemed to carry even more weight than the financial costs. There may be a cultural aspect to the costing approach making it particularly effective in the close knit rural Bangladeshi communities. Therefore, there is a need to understand the reasons behind the effectiveness of the approach and develop more innovative strategies of using the approach for behavioural change and awareness raising campaigns.



An external factor contributing to the success of the initiative was the passage of DV Act. Raising awareness of potential penalties under the DV Act supported COVAWs strategy to highlight the cost of violence to individuals and communities. Such state interventions helped to reinforce the project messages through normative arguments emphasizing social disapproval for domestic violence.

### **COVAW- as a model**

COVAW has yielded very impressive results as a model for prevention of domestic violence and more generally as an approach to triggering social change and shifting norms. However, there is a need for further testing it beyond the existing operating areas, by documenting it thoroughly and disseminating the model beyond CARE. The COVAW model needs to further test low cost ways of spreading the work in order to make it a model that can be spread at scale. The model also needs to integrate more active reflection and learning component so that it can evolve naturally rather than relying on training and activities in an orderly and repetitive fashion.

Some platforms according to one reviewer, had more representation of better off classes who have better linkages with the local government and elites. Representation of the better off classes can be beneficial if the impacts are reaching the extreme poor. Since a central vehicle of the model is platforms, understanding ways in which membership base affects the programme impact on the extreme poor is important if this model is to evolve as a real model for working on prevention of domestic violence.





## Use of existing platforms and their performance

COVAW used the existing platforms as an entry point to build on earlier initiatives of CARE Bangladesh. The purpose of establishing the platforms were different- in Sunamganj the platforms were originally established to improve community linkages with the service providers, in Tangail the platforms were established to develop action plans and managing resources and in Dinajpur the platforms were established specifically to address violence against women. In Tangail and Sunamganj the platforms were engaged in a wider spread of activities mainly due to CARE's evolution of work in those areas. Platforms in Dinajpur were specifically designed to address VAW while the other platforms were exposed to some extent on VAW. The performance of the platforms was influenced by many factors according to the study on platforms.

One such critical factor is the extent to which an empowerment model was pursued by the original constructors of platforms. It is important to develop a core vision that guide strategies and processes on empowering such platforms for future programming in CARE and other organisations which aim to use community based platforms for a programme based approach. The other factor related to performance is the membership base. The platforms having adolescent members and close connection with the community demonstrated more willingness, solidarity and vitality.

The study also pointed out that capacity and sustainability are interlinked. The typical projectised-nature of work resulted in inadequate capacity on networking by the platforms which posed challenges in using these platforms as vehicles for achieving wider spread and sustainability-central aspects of programming approach.

The exploration of inter-play between the two factors- capacity and sustainability also pointed out the need to develop the capacity of the field facilitators who are an important link in the community in terms of continuity of the work. It highlighted the need to equip the field facilitators with resources such as information and skills so that they feel empowered in their future role. The other important area of learning from the study is sustainability would largely be dependent on how well we empower the platforms members in their roles who we aspire would become drivers of change?

Amongst the multiple platforms that COVAW has used the interest groups comprising of *shalishkars*, religious leaders, teachers and UP members appeared to most likely continue due to their roles in the society independent of the project. It implies that working with these actors is critical for programmes addressing violence against women.

One important benefit from using existing platforms which had already engaged on GBV and reproductive health through other projects of CARE Bangladesh, the project was able to leverage significant progress made within these projects to engage more deeply in social change.

Though the platforms in Dinajpur specifically established to address violence against women showed comparatively greater awareness on the issue, they were comparatively less active and more dependent. One implication of such a finding could be a need to employ better strategies for creating energy and vitality in facilitating platforms that are working on challenging issues like VAW. The other could be that it is more challenging to focus on VAW activities in absence of wider livelihood related issues as evident from Dinajpur and Tangail experience-especially for women since these are critical to advancing their rights. Therefore initiatives working on VAW need to make institutional relationships with organizations working on livelihood issues.



## Future potentials in advocacy

There is a need to capitalize on the costing data for advocacy to prevent domestic violence. The data in the national report and the methodology itself has enormous potentials to influence programmers, policy makers, and communities to shift attitude towards VAW and to invest resources to combat VAW and support survivors.



## CONCLUSION

COVAW has taken a first step in CARE Bangladesh's programming to discuss a very sensitive issue like domestic violence publicly. The success of the project lies in the way it has helped communities to define what domestic violence is and made them realise the cost and consequences of violence against women.

Most importantly, COVAW has been successful in creating a space both at national and local level for more analyses and discussions on economic and social cost of violence against women which will contribute to broaden the understanding of the society on impact of violence against women.

