

# Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment

REPORT 3

Summary Report

Partnership for  
Healthy Life (PHL):

Violence Against Women  
Initiative (VAW)

Original Report: Nazneen Kanji, March 2006

## Information on PHL

Districts: Dinajpur

Unions: 15

Donors: CARE International  
UK, CARE USA, Bill Gates  
Foundation, American  
Express Bank

Time Frame: 2004-2006

Number of Program  
Participants: 400,000  
(80,000 women)

Number of Staff: 16

## Background

The aim of CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII)<sup>1</sup> is to better understand CARE International's contribution to women's empowerment and gender equity. The global research protocol uses a framework based on three interrelated dimensions or faces of empowerment: agency, structure and social relations. Within this broad analytical framework, each participating country office has designed its own Strategic Impact Inquiry taking into account the ways in which gender relations are shaped by local and national contexts. In Bangladesh, the strategic impact inquiry was initiated with a study that looked at the notion of women's empowerment from the perspective of individuals and groups within local society<sup>2</sup>. Following this, detailed impact inquiries were conducted in three CARE projects. This summary captures the main findings, recommendations and implications arising out of the study that focused on the Violence Against Women (VAW) initiative of the Partnership for Healthy Life Project (PHL).

## Program Description

### Objectives

The goal of the Violence Against Women initiative of PHL is: to ensure the realization of women's dignity and rights to freedom from gender-based violence by strengthening civil society and empowering communities, by building their capacity, making allies with stakeholders and advocating for women's rights at all levels of the intervention in Dinajpur.

The specific objectives are:

- To mobilize communities through empowerment and mediation at the village level
- To establish and enforce village level support mechanisms
- To coordinate, provide leadership and support through Union *Parishads*<sup>3</sup> (UPs) at the union level
- To generate a coordinated community response through government systems consisting of quality services (including health, psycho-social counseling, legal, law-enforcement) at sub-district level
- To create an enabling environment through policy enforcement at the regional level.

### Strategy and Activities

The Violence Against Women initiative of PHL works with a wide array of stakeholders to attempt to change attitudes and beliefs (and hence behaviors) around violence against women, while at the same time develops and enhances structures and support mechanisms for those affected by violence.

The project began by activating the Upazilla Violence Against Women Coordination Committee<sup>4</sup>, engaging local community leaders in dialogue about violence against women. Daylong advocacy and coalition building workshops were organized at the Upazilla and Union levels with the support of the Upazilla Nirbahi Officer and Union

1. For details on CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment and the empowerment model used, please see accompanying brief. (Report 1)

2. Kanji, N. with B.Bode and A.Haq "Women's empowerment: perceptions, boundaries and strategies in Jalagari Village, NW Bangladesh" , August 2005, Care Bangladesh.

3. The Union Parishad is the governing body at union level (the lowest administrative unit of government). The Upazilla is a sub-district.

4. The Upazilla VAW committee draws together officials from different agencies under the government women's affairs officer and is charged with providing support and leadership in changing norms, implementing activities and addressing the needs of victims.

*Parishad* chairman. These latter workshops drew between 80 and 100 people at each location including local officials, elected representatives, religious and other leaders, NGO and community based organisation representatives, lawyers, journalists, youth and adolescent representatives and a cross-section of the population as a whole.

Following the union level workshops, informal discussions were held in local communities leading to the selection of 10-15 representatives in each village to form village level violence against women forums (henceforth VAW Forum). The responsibilities of the forums include: collecting information about violence against women, raising awareness, liaising with *shalish*<sup>5</sup>, referring cases to services and organizing protests and resistance as the need arises. To date, about 40 VAW Forums have been established, 20 in Ishania Union and 20 in Birampur Union.

Further efforts to change attitudes at the community level include work with youth groups to develop and present dramas to disseminate messages related to violence against women<sup>6</sup>. Other efforts include arrangements with a professional folk song group to give regular performances propagating these messages and convening special interest groups including teachers, religious leaders, *shalish*, Union *Parishad* women members and youth and adolescents and encouraging them to meet regularly to support and initiate actions to reduce violence against women within their own spheres of activity.

Due to the weakness of the formal legal system, many cases of violence against women end up being heard in *shalish*. With the assistance of Ain-o-Shalish Kendro (ASK), a human rights and legal aid organization, the violence against women initiative of PHL has trained 180 *shalishkars* (community arbitrators) in gender, women's rights, mediation from a gender perspective, para-legal issues and ethics in arbitration. Attempts have also been made to encourage the inclusion of Union *Parishad* women representatives and other women from local communities in the *shalish*, and for *shalish* to pay more attention to cases of violence against women.

VAW Forums monitor *shalish* proceedings and, where cases cannot be resolved, arrange for them to be referred to the Union *Parishad*. The forums also keep records and document individual cases. In cases of serious violence, forum members may refer cases directly to the police. If a woman is in need of medical assistance, VAW Forums will refer them to the Upazilla health center. Through an arrangement with Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), a lawyer is made available at the Upazilla offices each fortnight to provide legal representation, mediation and other services for those affected by violence.

In summary, the focus of the project is to raise awareness, stimulate dialogue between different actors and change the way in which informal and formal institutions and services work. Attention has been paid to working with men as well as women, recognizing the need to change men's attitudes, particularly those of elite men who wield significant power in local political and social relations. Much effort has been directed at trying to transform social structures to make them more likely to promote women's rights, including making space in local institutions for women to participate. The major thrust has been to build advocacy and services to fulfil women's rights, particularly the right to live free from gender-based violence.



5. *Shalish* refers to the traditional practice of informal arbitration of community disputes at the village or union level usually presided over by local elites who are referred to (in this role) as *shalishkar*.

6. To date, two such groups have been formed with ten to fifteen members each. They have given about ten performances under the auspices of village level forums.

## Context

The project operates in a difficult political and social context with respect to its program goals. Formally, the government of Bangladesh ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and, in 1997, adopted a National Policy for the Advancement of Women (NPAW) that identified actions against violence as a priority area for government intervention. However, significant changes were made to this policy in 2004, which now excludes key statements related to women's property rights, inheritance rights and political empowerment.

The social context of violence in rural Bangladesh has been described in an earlier CARE report as follows:

Violence against women is considered a normal part of life by a significant number of both men and women. It is considered a personal and private affair to be handled within the family or local context. The legal system is distrusted and widely perceived (including by representatives of the legal profession) as unlikely to provide unbiased justice in cases of violence against women. Related factors such as dowry and child marriage are illegal but almost universally practiced. Many villagers willingly express unhappiness with the situation (particularly with respect to dowry) but see no socially viable alternatives.

The Strategic Impact Inquiry focused on Ishania Union, the area with the most extensive project activities to date. Land in this area is concentrated in the hands of medium and large farmers so there is high inequality between the rich and the poor. Ishania Union is unusual in that the population is 60% Hindu with Hindus being generally poorer than Muslims. It is an area, which has seen significant migration, social movements and resistance to the traditional *jotdar*<sup>7</sup> system. The culture here is more secular than in other areas in the northwest, with women, particularly Hindu women, enjoying a relatively high degree of mobility.

Politically, there are two main factions in Ishania Union and their struggle for power has a direct effect on project impacts since these power struggles interact with prevailing gender norms. The elites affect the outcomes of *shalish* and, the access of women affected by violence to legal aid and health services depends on the control that a certain elite group exercise in particular *paras*<sup>8</sup> and at the union level. The case studies in the full report provide a clearer illustration of the ways in which these actors influence project goals and activities.

## Methods

For this inquiry, a context analysis was carried out in Ishania Union and two villages in the Union were targeted for more in-depth examination of project impacts<sup>9</sup>. Group discussion and a project assessment exercise were carried out with VAW Forums in the selected villages and 18 individual interviews were also conducted in each of the two locations. Ten follow-up interviews were also conducted with women affected by violence and a group discussion held with 15 members of an existing women's savings group. Finally, a discussion was conducted with a Union level *shalish* group and a project assessment exercise conducted with the women *shalishkars*. Preliminary discussions with project staff contributed to understanding the constraints and choices made in relation to allocating scarce resources in an ambitious project dealing with very sensitive issues; this clearly demonstrated staff commitment to their work. More details on SII methods are available in an accompanying briefing note.

7. Rich peasant and money lender class

8. Para usually refers to neighborhood or immediate community. A village can have more than one paras.

9. PHL VAW staff were asked to select one village with the best functioning village VAW Forum and one with the worst. Kanpur and Modhupur/Mahabatpur were the locations selected.

## Impact Findings

### Changing Structures And Relations: Village Forums And *Shalish*

Problems of community representation on the VAW Forums exist in both locations, particularly in terms of representation of poorer groups and of Hindus. Nevertheless, in Kanpur, the forum is active and committed it has made space for women's participation and set examples for men's behavior. In Madhupur, the forum has been captured by one group of power holders and there is little encouragement for women to participate. In both VAW Forums, particular political factions with links to Union power holders seem to dominate. This is not only problematic at present but there is a risk that program efforts will be undermined if another faction wins a future election.

*Shalish* has seen tangible changes in Kanpur, whereas in Madhupur, there is a danger that it is being used to consolidate political and social capital by one group of elite power holders and to deny justice to some women. In both, women face gender-based problems in participation but there has been a positive change in men's attitudes in Kanpur. In both areas, practical issues of time and location of *shalish* are important for increasing women's participation.

There are issues of accountability in both VAW Forums. It is not clear how long members will serve on the forum and there is no mechanism for them to report and be accountable to villagers by whom they have been selected. If the project is to positively change structures and social relations at the village level, then promoting accountability mechanisms is an important element. VAW Forum members are aware that their association with CARE lends them greater power and legitimacy, which makes issues of representation and accountability even more important.

#### Changes in *Shalish*

(described by Kanpur VAW Forum members)

- Seating arrangements have changed - all sit on equal level (used to be some in chair and some on mats)
- People used to bargain before *shalish* and walk in with a decision made, but now issues are discussed in *shalish*;
- It used to be dominated by 2-3 families, but now wider interests are represented
- Although there was some tension when they formed the forum with older power holders and also with others that used to extort money from *shalish*, over time their influence has been reduced.
- Women's participation in *shalish* has increased.

#### Factors Contributing to an Effective Village Forum

(identified by Kanpur VAW Forum members)

- Active VAW Forum members willing to make time, day and night
- Involved elites and elders
- Regular communication among members
- Good follow up by CARE
- Members have a vision
- Members can set examples



### Changing Attitudes and Gender/Social Relations: Impacts at the Village Level

The use of folk song and drama has been an effective way to disseminate women's rights and raise issues for public discussion, as well as making people aware of project services. However, knowledge of the role and activities of the VAW Forum, even in Kanpur, is not widespread and people still tend to go to existing power holders for advice and support.

Folk songs and drama are a popular means of communication and reinforce messages from other media (radio, TV) and contribute to the positive work a number of NGOs are carrying out on women's rights and empowerment. Participation in these regular events is differentiated according to wealth, age and religion, although in Kanpur, the result that Hindus participate less is counter-intuitive and should be looked into.

Respondents in the Kanpur VAW Forum and women *shalishkars* were generous in acknowledging the project for engineering positive changes in violence against women and related issues of polygamy and early marriage. This was also noted by community members. Legal services are also perceived to have improved. Women *shalishkars* were also clear that there was a long way to go in improving the *shalish* process - giving women a voice in decision-making - and were aware that it remains difficult for poor women to obtain justice. However, space for women has been created in these previously completely male-dominated arenas. The Kanpur forum is making real efforts to decrease the practice of dowry. All respondents noted that dowry practices contribute greatly to violence against women and yet are the most resistant to change, with amounts to be paid on the rise.

### Agency and Gender Relations: Impacts on Individual Women Affected by Violence

There are a number of key issues that arise from an analysis of case studies. Most cases are of young women, who have limited status, voice and power in their in-law's household. As such, it tends to be the woman's parents who instigate a process of redress for her suffering. In at least one case, it was clear that the young woman was not even consulted by her father, who organized the *shalish*. In another case, the woman resisted *shalish* and continues to live with her husband, despite his ongoing infidelity. Although she does not view this as satisfactory, it is a decision she has taken to be with her children. Women, who continue to live with their husbands, and this is encouraged by *shalish*, may suffer considerable vulnerability from the more public attention to their situations. Although the husband may have agreed not to be physically violent, the issue of mental cruelty is more difficult to address and may well continue. In all the cases where a woman had stayed with her husband, she is still dissatisfied and/or unhappy.

This casework draws attention to the critical need for follow-up and counseling, for both wife and husband, preferably by trusted local community members. When the VAW Forum does follow up cases, it tends to be with family members rather than giving attention to how the woman feels. This should change and women on the forum could be trained to provide ongoing support to individual women. Safeguards are needed so that the project does not encourage public action on violence against women without trying to put in place an ongoing support for the individual women's rights and well being.

In the cases analyzed, people went to old *shalishkars* for help, rather than to new VAW Forum members. The issue then arises of whether the particular *shalishkar* is corrupt, and if the project can encourage discussion of cases and accountability to forum members and to the wider community of the modified or reformed *shalish*. Individual interviews as well as the discussion with the forums showed that women members of the forum in Kanpur are consulted and/or identify cases, which is encouraging. Interviews also suggest that some countervailing power to that of elite *shalishkars* is being built. However, this is not the case in Madhobpur, where the newer members and women seem to be marginalized.

Finally, it is clear from some of the cases that violence is sometimes condoned and perpetrated by in-laws, both women and men, as well as husbands. This suggests that awareness raising should be directed at the relations between a woman and her in-laws as well as with her husband.



## Implications

The project has adopted an approach that works mainly with village, Union and Upazilla structures. It does not work to build agency through strengthening or supporting women's groups at a grass roots level. Other NGOs work with women's groups on issues of violence against women and women's rights and, even if this project does not have the resources to do this, greater links with such NGOs may reach and strengthen the agency of more women, especially those who are poor and most disadvantaged. This is an important lesson for any project seeking to address violence against women.

To bring about a sustainable change, it is critical to directly empower women, the majority of whom are poor. While it is essential to work with elites in the context of Bangladesh in order to fuel a change in social structures, and in the issue of gender-based violence cutting across class and religion, it is important to build confidence and countervail power among the most disadvantaged women through collective strength and solidarity.

There is also a need to think through the composition and functions of the VAW Forum. As they stand, the two forums included in the study do not represent all social groups, and may inadvertently reinforce exclusion of some groups and build the power base of particular elite factions. If they are to represent communities, the process of selection has to be facilitated by CARE, the functioning of the forums has to be monitored, and accountability mechanisms to the wider community put in place.

As explained earlier, the cases studied demonstrate that more attention needs to be paid to finding ways to ensure support and protection for individual women. In addition, follow up counseling for both wives and husbands could also be made available by building skills of trusted local community members.

This violence against women initiative no longer functions in conjunction with other activities. Integrated approaches, which include other interventions to support women's empowerment, such as income-generation, and women-friendly health services, are important supports for such an initiative. VAW Forums and many individual community members who were interviewed called for this integrated approach.

This Strategic Impact Inquiry raises questions about the adequacy of the contextual analysis carried out, and suggests that attention should be paid to the following issues to inform future project design:

- Power net analysis at the Union level: to understand the elite groups, their links to Union politics and their likely influence on project activities.
- A rapid social and institutional mapping of the context to understand the relationship between existing groups and organizations at *para*, village, Union and Upazilla level.
- A deeper analysis of individual cases of VAW and how they are resolved or not resolved by *shalish* at the local level, taking into account wealth levels, religion, location and linkages with elite groups.
- A stronger emphasis on the views of women affected by violence. Building on their wishes and coping strategies to safeguard their rights.

There is considerable work undertaken by other NGOs on women's rights, including freedom from gender-based violence. At different levels, from local to national, CARE staff should build links with such organizations at different levels to promote coordination and learning.

In relation to monitoring and evaluation, it is important to build a participatory system with project staff and community groups early in the project cycle. A few ideas based on this SII are included in the full report. Combining different methods and indicators would help to triangulate the results to increase their reliability. The critical challenge is motivating and involving women and men at community level to set up a system, which can actually be sustained after the project is over.



## In Conclusion

Towards the end of 2006, through a series of workshops and meetings, CARE Bangladesh facilitated a synthesis process to review the findings emerging from each of the SII studies, and to explore the implications of these findings for future work to promote women's empowerment. Feedback from project participants present at the SII Synthesis meeting held in Dhaka in September clearly indicated that, while there had been significant impact on the lives of women involved in CARE projects, what was needed was greater impact on institutions such as dowry, early marriage, women's security, women's leadership and cohesiveness of the women's movement. Reflections from synthesis work in Bangladesh and beyond provide some valuable recommendations and make a compelling case for critical programmatic and organizational change in order to achieve the impact we seek on women's empowerment. As women's empowerment is unfolded through a continuous process of reflection on the findings and recommendations emerging from SII studies, CARE Bangladesh gears itself to reshape its change agenda for women's empowerment.



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### Reshaping the Change Agenda for Women's Empowerment

At a global synthesis meeting, participants from various SII research sites around the world shared their findings with each other to answer key questions in relation to the implications for CARE:

- What have we learned about **conceptualizing empowerment** and what new learning do we need to generate in the future?
- What **actual impacts** positive, absent, or negative (harms) are we convinced of in the sites where research was conducted?
- What **impact research methods** that we have we learned are most useful? What do we want to do differently in the future?
- What **changes in program practice and design** does our learning call for and how can we ensure they are understood and embedded in the organization?
- What **changes in organizational practices** do our learning calls for and how can we make sure they are understood and embedded into the organization?
- What **lessons/knowledge must be shared**, with which internal and external actors, and what knowledge products and sharing processes are most appropriate?

Reflections on some of these questions are available in the phase-II Global Synthesis Report entitled *The Courage to Change: Confronting the limits and unleashing the potential of CARE's programming for women*. Click on Women's Empowerment at the CARE Bangladesh site [www.carebd.org](http://www.carebd.org).