experience of working with men to prevent domestic violence[1]

INTRODUCTION

Gender relations and gender inequality in Bangladesh is often understood as "the problem with women". Therefore, most programs are designed to compensate for women's deficits - their lesser education, their poorer health or their poverty while leaving the construction of masculinity (ies) in our society unanalyzed, unproblematised and unaddressed.[2]

CARE Bangladesh identified masculinity (ies) as one of the underlying causes behind violence against women. It took a conscious effort to address masculinity in the Cost of Violence Against Women (COVAW) initiative which aimed to increase understanding of the community on the link between gender norms, beliefs and practices and violence against women (VAW) and cost of VAW to the society. Most importantly, it tried to engage with men and youth on the issue both as perpetrators of violence and drivers of change with a firm conviction that both perspectives require a balance to advance our future programme agenda on women s empowerment. This brief presents insights from the experience of working with men, youth and the communities on masculinity with the expectation that these may help other actors in future programming.

1. Compiled from original reports of Jyoti Dhingra, Therese Blanchet and Staff Reflections
2. Constructions of Masculinities and Violence against Women Study by Th□r se Blanchet, CARE Bangladesh, July 2001

Men s Perpetration of Intimate Partner Violence against Women and their Perception on VAW

Many studies of Bangladesh have revealed the extent of men s attitudes and practices that perpetuate violence against women. According to a study on men s attitudes and practices regarding gender and violence against women in Bangladesh:[3]

- 60 percent of urban men and 62 percent of rural men think that women deserve to be beaten
- Majority of rural men and half of urban men believe a woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together
- About 60 percent of urban and 76 percent of rural men held that a man should have the final say in family matters
- 52 percent of urban men and 46 percent of rural men reported ever emotionally abusing their intimate partners.
- 16 percent of urban and rural men reported perpetrating some kind of economic abuse against their partners during their lifetime.
- Over half of the urban and rural men reported ever perpetrating some kind of physical violence against a partner.

COVAW s exploration into case studies[4] of men who were able to change their practices in relation to intimate partner violence reveals useful insights around men s perception of causes, triggers and consequences of violence and their attitude towards gender equality.

- On causes of violence, the most common cause reported was their impatience with women s incompetence with their household responsibilities and problems of anger management which also indicated that men do not consider women s work as important as their own. Though men highlighted many causes such as poverty, dowry, frustrations resulting from inability to provide for the family and age gap between the couples, there is a tendency to rationalize domestic violence.

- On the impact of domestic violence, men could easily relate to consequences of physical injury but not any other kind of psychological effect or impact on family, children and society. However, whether an injury is serious or not is a matter which is very much dependent on individual perception. The occurrence of physical abuse alone is not enough to consider it as serious .

- On the change process, men identified factors such as reactions of family members, support from family and friends, opportunities of self-reflection and being able to visualize the impact of violence against women through project activities helped them to change their behavior. The change process according to them was a slow and gradual one taking at least 3-4 months for just the realization to take place and almost a year to translate the realization into commitment or actions.

- On the effect of reduced domestic violence or no violence at home men felt that it helped to improve their spousal relationship by opening up a space of communication where women also felt less stressed and more confident. It also helped men to accommodate women s opinions in decisions regarding family and work.

- On attitudes towards gender equality, it was interesting that those men who were beating their wives even a year back held the perception that daughters and sons are equal. However, when it came to questions of addressing domestic violence in their

3. A study conducted by ICDDRB, UNFPA, Partners for Prevention and the Change Project
4. Transforming men-Shifting Gender Relations by Jyoti Dhingra, CARE Bangladesh 2011

daughter s lives, most men preferred to make the son-in-law and their families understand the consequences. Most male respondents opined that boys and girls should get equal opportunities of education, but further probing revealed that parents consider education for boys is important for greater security of parents, while education for girls is seen as important for different causes like properly nurturing children, better household management etc. It is important to ensure that parents are also motivated by a vision of women s empowerment if we are to realise the real benefits of girl s education. Men showed a strikingly high level of awareness of negative effects of early marriage but felt an inability to resist it due to dowry and other safety issues of girls. There is a need to deepen our understanding on parental concerns around safety for girls and address these through different interventions.

ACTIVITIES OF COVAW

The need to engage with men has been increasingly recognized by many actors, however the manners in which this can be done effectively are yet to be tested. The activities with men and youth in COVAW project are also some innovative tools which need be considered in light of their potential to bring the desired positive change in men, youth and the community. The activities were designed as part of a process of change which would first help develop awareness, realization and recognition of the issue and then gradually change practice. The activities mentioned below are a sub-set of project activities that were specifically designed to engage men in such discussions.

Education Session:

The education session for the project was designed with an objective to increase understanding of the communities on the link between violence against women and gender norms, practices and behaviors. The sessions included topics on masculinity and its link with VAW. The specially designed PLA tools addressed issues like controlling attitudes, gender stereotyped roles, socialization of masculinity, under-recognition of women s work and consequences of VAW through life-map analysis. The sessions also included tools that helped interest groups and other forums to understand direct and indirect economic cost of violence against women.

Couples Workshop:

The objective of the couples workshop was to work with couples to resolve their problems in relation to VAW in marriage. The project took an innovative strategy of combining couples who had violence in their relationship with those who did not. This proved to be an effective strategy primarily for two reasons: 1) it helped participants realize alternative ways of resolving problems, and 2) it prevented negative labeling of couples who had violence in their relationship in the community by not focusing exclusively on them.

The workshop process used a combination of simple tools for achieving the workshop objective and reinforcing the project messages to prevent domestic violence. From simple exercises of mapping out qualities of a good husband and wife, it moved to discussion on the difference between ideal and reality in others and their lives. Discussions about husbands work and non-recognition of women s work generated from the work analysis tool used in the workshop and the other exercise gradually opened up a space to talk about intimate problems and communication gaps in couples in a non-threatening manner.

The process also used case study analysis to deepen the understanding of the participants of types, triggers, and consequences of violence. The case study analysis also helped to identify positive actors who could support the couples in reducing violence in their relationship. The workshops ended by generating simple action plans and commitments and token gifts like a couple s photo for making the experience more memorable.

The action plans and commitments generated in the workshop were followed up by with periodic visits and a refresher workshop. This process also helped to identify areas that need further discussions and improvements.

Positive Role Models

The project used positive role models to influence the community, particularly the men, for changing practices in relation to VAW. The forum members identified who could be the potential positive role models in their community based on the criterion that they set.

Through a screening process the forums identified positive role models, who shared their good practices with others, participated in different events to disseminate messages on cost and consequences of violence against women and provided advice to other men for preventing and reducing violence against women. The use of positive role models helped to demonstrate positive use of male power to the community. It also helped the project to celebrate such use of power.

Characteristics of Positive Role Models identified by the community members:

a. Did not physically abuse their wives
b. Take actions in preventing violence against women
c. Help in household work
d. Believe in equal rights between men and women
e. Credibility in the society

Men s Gatherings

Men s gatherings complimented the project efforts of observing 16 days activism and international women s day. Men and youth participated in this event. The positive role models played an important role in organizing discussions and debates for sharing their learning from education session and other COVAW activities. This helped to create solidarity between men. Most importantly, it helped to create a feeling that individuals are not alone in challenging traditional norms of violence or controlling behavior. Such gatherings also demonstrated to the community that there is a collective force which supports women s rights and gender equality and work for reducing violence against women. This helped to counter negative labeling of men who started to change their practice in relation to VAW and sharing family responsibilities.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF COVAW

The COVAW initiative worked with men to bring a change in their attitude and behaviour, shaped by social norms and years of socialization, with regard to violence against women. The change process was slow and long for each individual who have been able to change as a result of the project activities. Some of the achievements are highlighted below:

Self-realization of men

CARE Bangladesh under COVAW initiative created opportunities for self-reflection among men and women on their own biases and deeply-held beliefs and attitudes around gender equality and the use of violence to control. Moreover, COVAW was able to make convincing argument on consequences of violence against women through the cost analysis tools that helped trigger a reflection process within men. The discussions on the value of women s work in the household through education sessions and

root causes and consequences of violence against women on family and society motivated them to make commitments to stop violence against women. According to the male participants of the programme, the wide range of communication tools like drama, pot song[5] targeted at wider community, helped men to visualize the effects of violence at home and relate them to their own lives and situations.

This realization of the need to change was supported by the social environment created by COVAW through the arguments of costs and consequences of violence against women and therefore the need to condemn it. This was made possible by other community based campaign related activities. The activities combined with constant engagement of community facilitators helped instill a belief according to men that they too can change . However, this does not mean COVAW could reach all men or change all categories of men in a community through its activities.

Translating commitments into actions

The project gave emphasis to working with husbands who physically abuse their wives. All reviews and evaluations pointed out that the couple s workshop was particularly very effective in terms of changing behavior of men and reducing spousal violence amongst the couples who participated. The process of the workshop helped to address misunderstanding and communication gaps through simple action plans and commitments generated from the couples. The process also helped men to recognize that women s aspirations and expectations are often subdued due to rigid gender roles and expectations. Therefore, women s expectations are considered as a burden to them, their families and the society. Together, as couples they realized that meeting expectations of partners is an important element of the relationship.

From the experience of the project simple action points like identifying a person who the husband can share about issues that may trigger a violent action and help him think about consequences, commitments of not punishing women by restricting their wives mobility and sharing household chores had deeper consequences for couples who were in abusive relationships in moving towards an equitable and caring relationship. The follow-ups showed that spousal violence amongst the couples addressed reduced. However, the coverage of this activity was limited. A comprehensive design of such a process could be a useful group therapy tool for men for reducing spousal violence.

Sustaining Behavioral Change

In our societal context men who helps his wife or does not use his power to control his wife is often ridiculed by both men and women. Individual had started to take steps to either stop physically abusing their wives or helping their wives as a result of education sessions, campaign, one-to-one discussion with staff etc. However, these men also started to get negatively labeled. The use of the title of positive role models instilled a sense of pride and self-confidence in men in using their power differently. The celebration of positive role models and their contributions helped to sustain some of the behavioral changes in men who started to change by sharing household responsibilities with their wives or not resorting to violence etc. However, the project could use the positive role model more effectively for influencing wider group of men in the community.

5. A traditional form of folk-song in Bangladesh

LEARNING AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING:

The project invited men to attend discussions on masculinity, cost and consequences of violence against women and used behavioral change communication tools to bring about a positive change to prevent domestic violence. The evaluations and reflections of the work highlighted some key learning which are discussed below.

Creating Spaces for men

In working with men, COVAW faced practical challenges like men having little time to attend these programmes. Beyond these practical difficulties engaging men in discussions on masculinity and inviting them to question norms and practices that lead to violence against women is not a matter of priority to many men. Moreover, the project experience also highlights that men lacked either spaces of ventilation or open discussions of alternative ways of dealing with a problem with their partners. Therefore, future programming for bahavioural change in men will require opening up non-threatening reflective spaces that help them to understand consequences of VAW in a convincing manner as individuals, partners and change agents. More importantly, such spaces will allow them to understand alternative strategies of dealing with conjugal problems and trying out new attitudes and behaviours that goes against the prevailing social norms.

> Men felt that the couple s workshop particularly was helpful for discussing intimate issues and reaching solutions that are meaningful and practical as it was able to set the right environment and principles

Positive role models-as change agents

The application of the approach of positive role model was particularly challenging as the positive role models were identified using notions of the community and therefore depended on the level of awareness of the community. In an area like Dinajpur where CARE had worked for twelve years a village could only identify 2 positive role models while in other areas where CAREs work was a comparatively shorter duration, a village identified 5-6 positive role models. In certain cases, the actual practice of the role models did not match up to the expectations from such role models. In future, when programmes use such approaches it would be useful to have a built in process that allows systemic discussions to help communities make the distinction between what is usually superficially seen in terms of the characteristics of role models and the reality particularly in relation to practices at homes. In using such approaches it is also important to integrate participation of wives and immediate family members in the selection process.

Reaching the Unreachable

In a thematic study on men s engagement, masculinity and positive role model it became evident that some categories of households could not be approached through the project while others did not listen . The rich and the powerful families with higher social status could not be addressed as they are reluctant to discuss such issues publicly. Those who do not listen are located much lower in the social structure.

The following quote illustrates an example of people who do not listen-

When I got angry I hit my wife with anything at hand. I cannot think then how much I hurt her. I admit that such behavior is nirjaton (Unjustified violence). I know it is damaging. With this violence there is not prosperity in a family. But society does not exclude me for beating my wife. Beating up my wife or showing her affection is my affair. I am the one who hits and I am the one who sees to the repair

Though these two categories that could not be approached form a minority, they are nevertheless important to address. It is important to address the families with higher status to break away from traditional notions that domestic violence occurs only in poor families and due to poverty.
The study further points out that there is a social core where people listen and pay attention to rational arguments on high cost of VAW. Future programmes should use local power structure and social analysis to define intervention and targeting strategies for addressing different categories of households. In programmes addressing domestic violence more emphasis should be given in understanding ways in which violence has structured a relationship for years because couples faced with spousal violence either learn to hide or accept the unacceptable which does not easily come under public scrutiny. This is particularly important for addressing those who do not listen .

Untouched terrains

A view that marriage provides a necessary shelter for women and that women are oshohai (disempowered) without a marriage still strongly dominates our society. Men also strongly believe that women tolerate violence because they have no where to go if the marriage fails. These notions however are not true. Such false notions and beliefs surrounding the institution of marriage could not be addressed in a meaningful way through the project. If such core issues are not addressed programmes may become side-tracked from addressing the root causes. Since field staff are an important link between the programme messages and the community, it is important for programmes addressing domestic violence to acknowledge that field staff may also hold such beliefs. By proactive measures which encourage staff to address their own biases and reflect on their own belief, we further strengthen their ability and equip them with strategies to support those women for whom marriage is no longer a choice due to domestic violence. CARE has a number of relevant toolkits and guidelines as do many other organizations.

In Conclusion

Some critiques may consider this way of work with men as soft approaches that undermine the power relations within institutions such as marriage. However, there is also a need to work on the relational aspects for promoting an equitable relationship within marriage. COVAW perhaps contributed more in this aspect by supporting men, women and the communities in understanding the negative impact of violence against women and importance of an equitable and caring relationship in a marriage.

On the whole, COVAW experience suggests a combination of increased family pressure, and increased confidence levels of women may be compelling factors for men to change. Combinations of interventions that include these factors are likely to be more effective than a single intervention.

design & print | head office | www.h-office.com

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

care

For accessing any of the report please contact: info@bd.care.org