

Motivating and Empowering Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh

PHREB

PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH (PHREB) is a non-profit organization that has been running long-term, school-based awareness campaigns since its inception in 2004. The purpose of these campaigns is to educate young people on human rights issues and encourage them to speak out and defend their own human rights. These campaigns help young people gain confidence, which empowers them to mobilize their families and communities in the fight against gender-based violence.

PHREB started with a study of the conditions faced by women in poverty from a diverse range of religious and citizenship statuses, and their wishes, wants and desires. PHREB undertook detailed fieldwork surveys in selected slums around the Chittagong District to obtain the needed information.

Field data gathering used both formal and informal methods, from household interviews to forum discussions to integrated workshop participation. From estimates and responses provided by the participating women, PHREB was able to identify poor living standards and limited access to decision-making mechanisms as barriers to empowerment.

PHREB began its first project “Ending Violence against Girls and Women” in 2005 with financial support from the Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO) of the Netherlands and received three awards in Bangladesh and abroad for its contribution in fighting violence against women.

Context

From the early stages of life, Bangladeshi girls are taught to be dependent on, and submissive to, men. They are kept ignorant of their basic human rights which limit not only their broader education, but also more importantly their choices in terms of marriage, career aspirations and personal safety. It is through this ignorance that women are instilled with the idea that they will be disobedient if they are economically independent, they cannot walk alone because it is not safe, they cannot work long hours as it will hamper their household duties, and perhaps the most damaging, they cannot think their own thoughts or speak their own minds.

The social constructions of class, gender and normative values create an environment with limited scope for change. In the region, where an estimated sixty percent of the population is illiterate, where economic growth is limited, where corruption is rife, where educational, health and welfare services are inadequate, life for the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis takes the form of a difficult struggle. In such circumstances, along with an imbued cultural conservatism, the role of young women in particular lacks independent agency.

Such prejudice is not sustainable in any community. Peace and prosperity can only be sought if all members of the community are able to contribute in meaningful, empowered and equal ways. Empowering young women and girls is an essential part of maintaining the social, cultural and economic fabric of Bangladeshi society.

Turning Oppression into Empowerment

Since its inception in 2004, PHREB has been educating young people at school to motivate them to become “Leaders of Change” by helping build their self-esteem and bring the “power of resilience and of change” that they wish to bring in their own communities. The educational activities are in the form of school campaigns. Currently, PHREB runs campaigns at two hundred fifty schools per year, reaching out to over 300,000 students in the Chittagong Metropolitan City, Rangamati Hill District and Moheshkhali Upazila of Cox’s Bazar District.

The school campaigns cover international human rights instruments including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The campaigns are divided into school-based activities and community interventions.

1. School-based Workshops

The campaign begins in the form of workshops in various schools, where young girls and boys learn through presentations and demonstrations from PHREB staff members about fundamental and basic human rights and gender equality. Over the years, the campaign has broadened its scope to include issues that directly impact adolescents. These issues include health and hygiene, illness and diseases, food safety, nutrition and water sanitation, HIV/AIDS awareness, sexual and reproductive health, eve teasing, harassment, domestic and sexual abuse, and violence against girls and women. These workshops educate young people on a range of topics and encourage them to speak out and defend their own human rights. The workshops are designed to make young people gain confidence that will empower them to mobilize their families and communities.

The students participate in group-work sessions to discuss what they have learned in the workshops and then impart this knowledge to their peers through drama, song, dance or debate.

The workshop activities employ various educational materials including the various international human rights instruments. Each classroom has forty to over one hundred students.

PHREB also organizes other school-based activities such as celebration of the National Girl Child Day and the International Human Rights Day. The celebration activities include cultural functions and debates.

2. Inclusive Training Sessions

Students from the school workshops that showed interest in actively promoting human rights are selected by PHREB to participate in Inclusive Training Sessions. These students learn in-depth about international human rights and the child rights. They participate in group activities that further enhance and build their knowledge that helps them mobilize the school community. Each group would have an average of forty to fifty students from each school.

Police officials are invited to attend the training sessions to offer advice and support to the female students. On 16 July 2009 the deputy police

commissioner of Chittagong (North), Mr. Banaj Kumar Majumdar, attended PHREB's training workshop giving the girls further opportunity to be heard and further highlighting the importance of reporting violent incidents to the police.

PHREB has been reaching out to a number of new schools since the beginning of July 2009. Campaigns in these new schools have been very successful, with PHREB staff doing an excellent job of engaging these young people, whose views and ideas have been inspirational. Students have been enthusiastic and energetic about learning; many of them asking for the sessions to continue for longer and wanting to know when they will next be visited by PHREB.

After the training sessions, the students are divided into three groups:

a. Sports. Female students participate in a range of sports at their school to provide an environment for them to unite and share personal experiences with each other.

b. Cultural events. The holding of theater, singing and art exhibitions and other cultural events have always been a very important way to mobilize communities. The events take up issues affecting adolescent girls in society, to create awareness and empower others.

c. Debate. Students debate on a range of relevant topics such as women's rights issues, domestic violence, early marriage, and dowry. They hold debate forums in front of the school and encourage others to get involved. Debate is important for girls to learn about their rights and the laws enacted to protect them.

3. Community Engagement

Students who participate in the School Workshops and Inclusive Training Sessions develop the capacity to engage their own communities on human rights and other issues. Adolescent girls who are given space to build confidence and alliances with other girls, as well as develop the skills they see necessary, become important change-makers in Bangladeshi society.

PHREB has developed a community-based platform for teachers, social leaders, youth leaders, students, local elective bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and educational institutions that campaign for women's rights. This initiative works to reduce incidences of child marriage, eve teasing, rape, dowry-related violence, domestic violence and acid throwing.

It also launched a number of community-based interventions in line with its objective of promoting child rights and women's rights, namely:

a. Family-level Mobilization. PHREB organized one hundred six family-level campaigns at Chandagaon, Chakaria, Moheshkhali, Talukdar Para, Banderban Hill District, Rangamati Sadar to mobilize family members to work against gender discrimination.

b. International Women's Day. PHREB celebrated the International Women's Day in 2006 and 2007 in a slum area, Shadur Para Slum in Chandagaon, Chittagong, with hundreds of men and women who were given the opportunity to share their stories.

c. Seminars. PHREB organized three community seminars in Chakaria Thana community, Cox's Bazar District, to raise public awareness of women's rights.

d. Artists for Human Rights (AHR). In April 2006, PHREB developed a network of young singers, dancers, cultural activists with ages ranging from 15 to 24 years who were committed to promoting women's human rights and gender equality. AHR organized various forms of cultural functions and interactive forum theaters at the community level.

e. The Imam's Movement for Women's Rights. PHREB started a program seeking to re-establish justice through an intervention of religious leaders in the communities.

PHRB found that if it could change the mindset of children and youth, it could make a difference in the present culture of violence against women. Imams (Islamic leaders) are influential within the community and play a critical role in the way people, and especially young worshippers, lead their lives. There are over 250,000 mosques in Bangladesh. This indicates that the people of Bangladesh are devout followers/believers and the help of Imams is needed to improve the human rights situation in the country.

It knows that some Imams use Islam as a tool to subjugate women. However, there are some, though still a minority, who are knowledgeable about and committed to the way in which women are respected and regarded as equal to men in the Quran and Hadith.

It began working with Imams in 2005 on its STOP Violence against Girls Program. Fourteen Imams from the Chittagong region attended PHREB's December 2005 seminar entitled "Islam and Women's Rights." The Imams came together to discuss women's rights to property inheritance, their participation in civil society, and the prevention of gender-based violence. The

participants agreed to work with PHREB in ending violence against women and girls and the Imams Movement for Women's Rights was set in motion.

Four hundred sixty-five Imams in south Bangladesh have been involved with this movement since October 2009 and this number is increasing. PHREB sees these leaders taking a stand against all forms of violence against women at home, in school, at work, and on the streets. Their Friday speeches at the mosques, reaching around 600,000 men every week along with those in *Waj Mahfils* (community-based religious gatherings), are influential means to send the message of stopping violence against women.

4. Creation of Change-Makers

These united, educated and confident young girls and boys have the ability and capacity to lobby for change. They write to district government officials and parliament members to address the issues facing adolescent girls and advocate for change.

School Organizations

PHREB organizes the students and the teachers to support its programs in the schools. It organizes the Teachers-Students School Management Committee, the Bangladesh Kishori Adhikar Forum [Adolescent Girls Alliance] or BKAF, and Leaders of Tomorrow Clubs.

PHREB encourages male students to take part in the campaign to end violence against women by encouraging them to form Leaders of Tomorrow Clubs. These clubs aim to empower boys to become champions for human rights in their communities.

Some of the female students join the BKAF and learn about issues affecting themselves and other women in Bangladesh and how to raise their voices in order to enjoy their fundamental rights. During BKAF meetings, the female students can speak out about the violence, abuse and victimization they are suffering from.

BKAF is an adolescent girls' alliance committed to motivating the victims of gender-based violence to become leaders of change while also continuing to raise awareness on issues of violence against women, sexual and reproductive rights, maternal health and women's rights. It is the biggest alliance of adolescent girls in the country with over 38,000 registered members across two hundred ninety-five chapters. Members include students,

garment workers, victims of gender-based violence, domestic workers, street girls and slum girls. BKAF members unite and stand up for the rights of women and girls, gender equality, right to safe schools, water, sanitation and hygienic practices, and learn how to keep themselves free from all forms of violence. It organizes regular motivational dialogues, theaters and cultural functions on violence against children, gender equality, reproductive and sexual health, HIV/AIDS, girls' right to education, health care services and social justice. BKAF members who are recognized as adolescent "change makers" have the opportunity to speak at the annual Adolescent Girls' Summit, which is attended key community persons, and members of the police, civil society and women's rights organizations.

International Work Camp

PHREB will be organizing an International Work Camp in support of the long-term evolution of Bangladeshi society into a society where women are free from violence and are empowered to live their lives as they choose. By utilizing the skills and advocacy capacity of international volunteers, PHREB aims to generate an awareness and receptiveness to the ongoing campaign. The Work Camp will include a number of activities such as:

School Workshops: International Volunteers will work with local volunteers and staff to educate youth and children about human rights and gender equality through workshops for students and teachers. The workshops will consist of various games and activities to develop an understanding of international human rights standards and their applicability to everyday life. These activities will allow the youth to understand how their behavior can impact on people around them and alert them to the rights of these people that need to be upheld.

Art, Essay Writing and Debate Competitions: Following the workshops, students will be invited to build on the knowledge and ideas gained by writing essays, submitting artworks or joining formal debate competitions on any topic of relevance to human rights.

Youth Summit: At the end of the school campaigns, outstanding youths will be invited to join a youth summit where local children will speak about human rights and gender equality.

International volunteers will facilitate the human rights education campaign, develop human rights education modules, write reports, and develop audio-visual documentaries.

The Work Camp will be held over a one-month period in mid-2010.

Other Programs

In addition to the school campaign, PHREB has other successful programs including legal aid, movement for women's rights among religious leaders, and another school program.

The Access to Legal Aid and Counselling Program is undertaken through PHREB's human rights lawyers' network. Women can access legal advice and support free of charge. In partnership with the Chittagong Medical College, PHREB offers victims of rape and acid attack the needed medical and counselling support.

The Tulip School is another school-based program that offers quality non-formal and formal education for underprivileged girls. PHREB campaigns for safe schools for girls, and each Tulip School accommodates up to sixty students for primary and secondary levels of education.

Some Achievements

The main achievements of the school-based interventions of PHREB as of October 2009 are the following:

- 3,564 school workshops were organized in three hundred ninety six secondary schools and fifty-eight colleges covering more than 659,300 students in Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and Rangamati Hill Districts.
- Three hundred seventy-four BKAF chapters have been established with 56,329 registered adolescent girls in Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and Rangamati districts. The alliances are committed to stand up against all forms of violence against adolescent girls.
- The Kisholoya Adarsha High School BKAF chapter organized "SAY NO to Violence against Girls" campaign in Shonadia Island on 15-18 May 2006. The campaign included a community seminar and a family level mobilization.

- School Committees have been established in thirty-nine secondary schools.
- Highlights of the School Campaign – PHREB has been reaching out to more schools since the beginning of July 2009. Campaigns in these schools have been very successful, with PHREB staff doing an excellent job of engaging the young people, whose views and ideas have been inspirational. Students have been enthusiastic and energetic about learning; many of them ask for the sessions to continue for longer periods and want to know when they will next be visited by PHREB. To celebrate the achievements of young girls and encourage greater participation in education, PHREB runs an awards initiative for girls who achieve a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 5 in their secondary school examinations in Chittagong. Girls are encouraged to give a speech at an awards ceremony at which key community representatives are also invited to speak. Winners join the BKAF to advocate for women’s rights.
- BKAF has grown dramatically since it began in 2004 and now has more than 56,000 members in three hundred seventy-four chapters. PHREB organizes BKAF School Chapters which undertake a number of activities including Weekly Motivational Dialogue (exclusively for girls, they discuss problems related to gender discrimination), Advocacy Training (leadership training for girls), Cultural Function (includes music, dance and theater at the community level to raise public awareness of women’s rights), Lobby and Advocacy (dialogue with Cox’s Bazar District High School Education Department officials regarding violence against schoolgirls at school, need to increase the number of teachers who are aware of women’s rights, separate toilets for girls and boys, and putting up of complaints box to report any cases of violence at school). PHREB has organized one hundred sixteen weekly meetings in 2006 and three hundred fourteen meetings in 2007 for more than three thousand members.
- Young Women Summits in 2006 and 2007 – these gatherings brought together girls from Moheshkhali, Kutubdia, Chakaria, Pekua, Chittagong Hills Track, Chittagong city, Cox’s Bazar Sadar, Eidgaon, Ramu and Ukhia who discussed a number of issues including the importance of including human rights in the school curriculum.

- BKAF successfully lobbied the local government in (Moheshkhali island Sub-district of Cox's Bazar District) to increase the number of on-site doctors after a mother died during childbirth because the hospital's sole doctor was unavailable when she went into labor. BKAF representatives persisted in demanding from the hospital's administrator and local government officials to provide adequate health care at the hospital. The meeting where this demand was made was reported in *Prothom Alo*, Bangladesh's largest newspaper, and soon thereafter the number of doctors was increased from one to three.
- BKAF chapters are active in stopping child marriages. They take various steps such as community mobilization programs to make parents and peers become aware about the negative effects of child marriage, child pregnancy and domestic violence. If the parents do not pay attention to these awareness campaigns and they continue child marriages, the BKAF chapter leaders and members seek help from the community-based PHREB alliances with Imams, village heads, teachers and local government leaders and finally from the local police station.

A Look to the Future

By continuing its innovative campaigns and interventions, PHREB wants to make human rights a fact in Bangladeshi society so that every man and woman equally enjoy human rights and freedoms. PHREB dreams of a Bangladesh in which violence against women and girls does not exist and continues to work towards stopping all forms of gender-related violence.

PHREB plans to increase the number of individuals getting involved in its programs each year by reaching more than three hundred schools in the Chittagong region, one hundred communities, one hundred fifty mosques, and getting 100,000 BKAF members by the end of 2010. In addition, it aims to further develop the respective alliances among adolescents, head teachers and communities.