

ROLE OF NGOS IN EMPOWERING THE VULNERABLE WOMEN : A STUDY ON ACD

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Abstract : *The rise of the NGOs in the global context is identified as an important phenomenon, which has implication for the development prospects of the poor. In recent years, all the developmental sectors like to incorporate women's participation in development. But different social and religious values, beliefs, norms, prejudice have kept the women far away such development. To improve this fallen position and status of women many development organizations like Association for Community Development (ACD) are working together with the government. ACD is working for positive change of poverty stricken women and children. At present ACD works in 1220 villages of 57 unions under 15 Upazila of the three districts - Rajshahi, Naogaon and Chapai Nowabgonj. In this paper an attempt has been made to focus light on the impact of ACD activities on women of its working areas.*

Introduction

In Bangladesh like many other developing countries women's access to positions of influence and power is limited: their occupational choices are narrower, and their earnings lower than those of men; and they must struggle to reconcile activities outside the home with their traditional roles. While many men, particularly among the poor, also find themselves disenfranchised, it is a far more common experience among women. This experience is rooted in the failure to value women for anything but their reproductive role. The need for empowerment of women in Bangladesh arises from this harsh social scenario (Goswami, 1998: 45). Literatures suggest that NGO interventions positively contribute to women empowerment (Ahsan Ullah, 2003: 21). NGOs central goal is

empowering the powerless women folk or helping them to bloom their hidden potentialities, that is power of thought, power of word, and power of organization, with a view to helping them to participate in the socio economic development for their emancipation from less human condition to more human condition (Haider and Aktar, 1999: 57). In the crowd of voluntary organizations of Bangladesh, Association for Community Development (ACD) is distinct with its own approach and priorities. ACD tries to integrate the down trodden population lying below the poverty into the prospective mainstream of sustainable development Gender sensitivity is considered as the strategy and underlying philosophy behind development and implementation of the project activities of ACD.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the programs undertaken by ACD
- To find out the strategies followed by the organization
- To trace out the impacts of these programs and strategies on vulnerable women of its working area

Methodology

Information in this study has been called from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary source includes brochure, annual reports, and books etc. primary data basically collected through interview with ACD officials

Objectives of ACD

ACD is keen to develop a new approach to development and women issues. ACD believes that the increasing global concern about the human dimensions of development requires the integration of gender concerns in all stages and at all levels of sustainable development as a means to ensure human well being equitably enjoyed by an people. The interrelationship between population, resources, environment and development should be fully recognized, properly managed and brought in to a harmonious and dynamic synergy. To fulfill this vision ACD sets the following objectives (ACD, 2002):

- Combating Trafficking in women and children;
- For bringing about a qualitative change in the life style of the disadvantaged, distressed and risk group people, ACD to mobilize and organize them in to viable groups, through which they can asses their needs and plan and implements program accordingly;
- Raise the level of consciousness of the grass root partners to help to stand on their own through increasing production using mostly their own resources;
- Organizing women and consecintizing them through literacy and awareness education to identify and analyze the issues and social faces that deprived them of their rightful position;
- Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; Stop gender based violence against women in the family and society;
- Organize advocacy groups for lobbying and represent the cause of women in different forums to stop domestic violence, which is especially responsible for all sorts of sexual exploitation, trafficking and prostitution.

Programs of ACD

ACD's programs cover three sectors (Annual Report, 2002). Following discussion concentrates on these sectors.

Human Rights Sector: This sector aims to perform all activities relating to the preservation of target people's human rights. The target people are categorized into victims and probable victims. Separate actions are suggested for the two categories. This sector includes: activities like awareness-raising about rights at local level; working as pressure group on administration for protection of human rights; providing medical and legal aid services to the victims; reintegration and rehabilitation of the victims in the community; extending cooperation to government agencies to

establish good governance and civil society; and empowering the destitute women in family, society and the state. Under this sector various projects are undertaken. One of the projects is Promotion of Human Rights for the Grassroots Women which, mainly deals with the grassroots women and children. The objectives are to promote the socio-economic development, combating trafficking of women and children, networking, institutional development, and management capacity building. Another project is Promotion of Human Rights and Women Participation in Democratic Process. The goal of the project is to enhance the quality of life and socio-economic empowerment of the disadvantaged rural people, particularly women. The next project is Protection and Promotion of Rights of Adolescents in prostitution. The project goal is to promote safer sex practices and other life skill among adolescents in prostitution and their Clients and empower these adolescents against sexual exploitation, abuse and discrimination. The project objectives include promotion of the rights of adolescents in prostitution by raising their awareness on their rights, their self-confidence and protecting them from sexual exploitation and abuse, and development of positive social attitude towards the right of adolescents in prostitution. To reduce the rate of trafficking in women and children by increasing knowledge and improving understanding levels Capacity Building for Combating Trafficking of women and children in Bangladesh is adopted. The goal of the project aims to strengthen the human resource and institutional capacity building of both the local lowest tier of local government and the civil society of the border area to prevent and to combat trafficking. In addition, the project aims to building capacity of the UP Chairmen and Members who are expected to work for counter trafficking.

Child Rights Sector: This sector involves all welfare activities for street children, disadvantage children, and abused children. The activities include health services, shelter home facility, recreation facility, legal aid, literacy, cultural activity, youth group formation, advocacy group formation, awareness development, and creation of alternative, Job opportunities. To achieve these sectoral objectives ACD adopted Prevention of Child Trafficking and Sexual

Exploitation of Children project. The goal of the project is to prevent trafficking and sexual exploitation of children. The objectives include enhancing public awareness to reduce the number of child trafficking and sexual exploitation of children; improving living conditions of the children who became victims of trafficking; provide basic literacy to the children staying a longer time at shelter home. To establish justice, freedom, and prosperity of all children in hazardous condition without discriminating for race, gender, caste, religion, and culture Appropriate Resources for Improving Street Children Environment is adopted. The objective included improvement of the quality of life of the groups of street children in slum areas in Rajshahi City. The targets are the street children in Rajshahi City. Project strategy involves education along with skill development and awareness raising of child rights. Awareness Building Programme Against Child Trafficking project is undertaken by ACD. The goal of the project is to enhance awareness level at the bordering areas of Shibgang and Charchat Upazila. The objective is to meet the local community at family level so that they can have clear idea about the motive, movement, and network of the traffickers. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs started this project in 1999, ACD involved itself in this project in September 2002.

Sustainable Development Sector: This sector aims at providing permanence to the overall process of development. This includes attempts to integrate the women effectively as they represent fifty percent of the total population. Appropriate technology and essential training for enhancing productivity of rural resources, institutional credit for the destitute and landless women, and involving people, especially womenfolk into economic activities are prioritized in this sector. Following projects are undertaken by ACD in this sector: Village Farm and Forestry Project. The goal of the project is agro- forestry practices on private land to support and promote sustainable land use that could be economically profitable, socially just and ecologically sound. The project objectives aims at ready access of extension agencies and wide range of improved agro- forestry technologies applicable to women, the poor and the common tree farmers. Among other

objectives, a network of public and private institutions is attempted to involve in improving agro-forestry technology. The goal of Strengthening Household Access to Bad Gardening Extension project is to contribute a sustainable increase in the productivity of horticulture and agro-forestry systems in and around homestead of poor rural households in an ecologically sound, socially just and economically profitable way. The project objectives includes (a) enhancement of skills and knowledge of poor household to diagnose problem and access to appropriate practices of homestead horticulture, agro-forestry and social capital (b) making access to quality vegetables seeds and seedling development of knowledge and understanding required for the promotion of appropriate horticulture, agro- forestry and marketing; (c) strengthening the institutional framework supporting household and communities in homesteads horticulture and agro-forestry production and use of the products. The technologies of this project are sustainable and replicable for other areas. **WATSAN Partnership Project** aims at to improve water and sanitation (WATSAN) situation at grassroots level involving local communities. Project objective includes ensuring active community management and participation in water, sanitation, hygiene and arsenic sector through specific intervention. The project attempts to promote community management for rural water, sanitation services by village communities and their village development committees through local NGO's; It also wants to create better awareness on personal hygiene, sanitation and arsenic situation and to promote behavior change; to provide appropriate technology and their marketing on affordable prices through the private sector. Locally intensified Farming Enterprise project's objectives are to increase food production of food insecure households who primarily depend upon agricultural production for their livelihoods to protect the environment from pollution by reducing the indiscriminate use of all kinds of chemical fertilizer, pesticide, weedicide, etc.; to minimize production cost; to conserve and improve soil health through application of organic manure, modern technology (crop rotation, cropping pattern.); To improve socioeconomic status and nutritional well-being of the planning of homestead space; to utilize cultivated land properly (e.g. multi-storied cropping/multiple

cropping), unused land and fallow land; To make the most vulnerable women economically self dependent by cultivating vegetables, fruit trees, etc. Development of Sustainable Aquaculture Project mainly promotes pond aquaculture development, extension and culture based fisheries among the small farmers who have their own ponds. These farmers invest only 10-15 percent of their daily working time in fish rearing activities. Fish rearing is being considered as a family based activity. The pond aquaculture development and extension programs provides training, inputs and technical advice to enable farmer to raise different species of fish (primarily carp poly culture and carp-prawn poly culture) to marketable size.

ACD also has adopted Credit Programme. The goal of the project is to create greater employment opportunity for landless and asset less people in the rural area through credit programme, project objectives are to ensure availability of credit to the poor distribute resources to them on softer terms; make them capable to accumulate their own capital; make them able to change their situation initiated micro level investment. The target is the poor landless and asset less families of rural areas, project strategy is to collecting information regarding situation of the disadvantaged area and the disadvantaged families; offering them credit with necessary suggestions.

Major Programs: Corresponding Activities

Programs	Activities
Promotion of Human Rights for the Grassroots Women	Workshop, seminar and meeting; Advocacy; Developing local capacity, Awareness raising and campaign; Building networks and alliances; Investigation; Documentation and Publication.
Promotion of Human Rights and Women's Participation in Democratic Process	Workshop, Seminar, Meeting and Rally; Advocating for more targeted approach. Training for Local Elected Bodies, Upazila and District Administration; Networking with UP Members; Staff development; BRAC school model; Never enrolled or drop-out children; Positive gender ratio; Documentation, Research and Publication.

Programs	Activities
Prevention of Child Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children	Information collection and dissemination; Awareness raising and campaign; Rescue and repatriation; Shelter Home management; Reintegration and follow-up; Networking with GOs and NGOs; Advocacy; Staff development.
Appropriate resources for Improving Street Children Environment-ARISE	Awareness raising; Non-formal Education; Vocational Training; Running Drop-in-Center and Night Home; Providing Legal Aid; Proving Health Services; Job Placement; Networking with GOs and NGOs.
Awareness Building Programme Against Child Trafficking	Training workshop on awareness raising; Participation in Upazila level task force meeting.
Protection and Promotion of Rights of Adolescents in Prostitution	Training with Adolescent Peer educators, DSS, Hotel Management; Orientation of Peer Educators, Hotel management and Law Enforcing Agencies; Awareness building session with adolescents in the hotels; Exchange visit with the like minded NGOs; Co-operation, networking and alliances.
Capacity Building for Combating Trafficking in Women and Children	Training and sharing conceptual clarity regarding trafficking with LEB; Educational meeting with teachers and journalists; Meeting with Imam and social leaders; Forming Counter Trafficking Committee.
Village Farm and Forestry Project	Formation of Upazila level Nursery Malik Samity (NMS); Exchange visit of NMS; Formation of tree farmer group (TFG); Staff development; Action research and IEC materials development.
Strengthening Household Access to Bari Gardening Extension SHABGE	Season long training for staff; Nursery establishment training; Summer vegetable seed production and research; Entrepreneurship development; Farmers field school.

Programs	Activities
Water and Sanitation Programme WATSAN Partnership	Formation of Village Development Committee; Village education and planning; Hygiene behavior change; Arsenic test; Measures for alternative pure water; Tube well distribution and sinking.
Locally Intensified Farming Enterprise-LIEF No Pest Phase II	Increased food production; Protection against environmental pollution; Reduction of chemical pesticide use; Enhancement of decision-making power.
Development of Sustainable Aquaculture Project-DSAP	Final Farmer selection; Group formation; Income generation activities; Technology Distribution; Farmer's Training.
Micro Credit	Target group formation; Credit and savings; Self-employment development; Empowerment of poor women.

Source: ACD

Strategies adopted by ACD

Strategies employed to achieve the organizational objectives are as follows (personal communication):

Vulnerable women and adolescents are mobilized for raising voice against oppression and trafficking of women and children

Workshops / meetings are held with community leaders, representatives of locally elected body, and imam. The workshop / meeting aims at raising awareness on the legal and social aspects of polygamy, early marriage, verbal divorces and government plan for women's development, family law, shalish system etc.

Networking is proved to be effective means to promote the human rights. That's why ACD establishes link with local clubs, local NGOs, Social Welfare Department, Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, Shop Owners' Association, Trade Union, Action Against

Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children (ATSEC), End Child Prostitution Pornography and Trafficking (ESCAT) and police administration.

School programs are organized. These programs cover issues relating to awareness raising on legal and social aspects of polygamy, early marriage, verbal divorces, family law, reproductive health, etc.

Action research is conducted on socio-cultural issues. ACD has done a good number of research documents on trafficking and child abuse.

Posters, leaflets, bulletin etc. containing the message on human and women's rights and child rights are published and distributed to raise awareness of general people.

Dialogues with law enforcing agencies and with other NGOs are arranged on different issues.

Legal support provides by ACD is very significant and unique in the sense that such prompt response at the time of emergency of the victims is hardly provided by others. When a minor girl is raped or tortured she needs hospitalization, police contact personal and familial safety, vigilance, legal measures, etc. Victim's family cannot always do the responsibility immediately. They naturally feel helpless and even terrorized. ACD sets example of unique concerted action in case of such events.

Training programs are conducted on various issues. The farmer's leaders, community leaders and female mentors are trained up on leadership development and rules and responsibilities. ACD provides training to local NGOs on human rights, CRC (the convention of the rights of children), violence against women, gender relation development for the staff. Besides, it conducts awareness raising training workshop on child trafficking, sexual exploitation of children, and child rights to raise awareness among the children, parents/guardian, community members, Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA), and policymakers. Awareness campaign programs

are organized. Follow-up workshops on all human rights are organized for women leaders. It has a culture of holding participatory planning workshop. ACD initiated folk songs like Gamvira and Jarigan to reach the general masses. The result of such training, Uthan Baithak, and folk songs create much enthusiasm both as source of knowledge and information.

Co-ordination meetings are held on different issue.

Students are organized to play their vital and vigorous role in socio-cultural changes. By performing cultural activities, e.g. drama, songs, poetry, dance, they always emphasize the prevention of violence against women and all form of discrimination between man and woman. The students of different college and university units organize such activities and observe special days like International Women's Day, Rokeya Day, Human Rights Day.

ACD has established national, regional and international organizations working to combat trafficking in women and children.

The strategy of capacity building of the project staff through logical frame analysis and participation in workshop and meetings is an effective strategy. ACD attempts to develop capacity of persons involved as UP members and chairman. The capacity development aims at prevention and combating trafficking by developing dialogue between local government and civil society, mass rise of awareness, improving technical know how among them, and institution building at local level.

A systematic inventory is prepared for policy on the basis of the information given by the volunteers on child abuse and exploitation.

ACD provides micro-credit to the families of the reintegrated children and the vulnerable families.

ACD organizes cultural activities in rural fashion so that common people can understand the basic theme of CEDAW,

Platform for Action (PFA), gender relation development (GRD), reproductive health etc. ACD provides counseling to street children. It is found that the children are deprived of normal familial atmosphere. Poverty and conjugal discontent and even separation of parent lead them to such life without love, care, and encouragement. In this situation counseling is essential for part of their proper socialization. They are found successful in achieving means of solving their problem after proper counseling. Besides, drug addicts receive counseling under close observation.

In the drop-in-center of ACD, the children are receiving various treatment and facilities like education, medicine, counseling, night shelter, saving mentality development, micro-credit, locker use, technical training, cloth washing, leisure and recreation. ACD also establishes sub-centers. The children who work in shops, motor garage, hotels, etc. hardly find any facilities of taking bath, refreshment, latrine, and recreation. The sub-centre provides these facilities from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. The children also use the sub-centre for making paper bags for sale. The sub-centers also provide the facilities given in the drop-in-centre.

Advocacy programme is another important strategy. ACD holds advocacy with law enforcing bodies, local administration, lawyers, journalists, teachers, trade unions, chamber of owners and merchants, NGO representatives, local elite, district and upazilla administration, human rights activists and other concerned agencies which have immense impact with respect to prevention of violence against women.

In addition to that baseline survey is conducted, Learning Sessions are organized on different topics, different magazine/ leaflet/ books are published, and literacy centers are established.

The programs and strategies followed by ACD have direct impacts on vulnerable women of working area of ACD. Some of the examples are given below.

As direct impact, the status of living conditions has improved in terms of food intake, water sanitation, education of children, women's participation in decision-making and economic activities.

The vulnerable section now can understand the value of human rights that can be achieved through literacy, mobilization, schooling, marriage and birth registration, etc. The women and adolescents receive orientation on CEDAW, CRC, gender perspective, human rights and women's rights in literacy centers. It carries special weight in context of their position without effective power and property.

They are becoming aware of the reasons behind their present conditions. The non-formal education, legal support, and knowledge regarding existing legal rights and responsibility and reproductive right found to be good package of empowering women apart from employment and credit programme.

The orientation and training of the elected body, local leaders, other NGO workers, law enforcing agencies, students, club members, and government officials opened up a new horizon in their cognitive world. Training and networking with students have raised the awareness through initiation of discussion and creating an environment that has discouraged harassment of girl students.

The cultural motivational component has proved its potential. Women are now more participative in election, both as voter and candidate, and development activities. Now powerful support groups against gender violence have developed from religious and elderly people.

Members of the groups now gain ability to initiate social movement against trafficking of women and children. People in general are more aware of trafficking issue in the working area of ACD.

The area-based need assessment workshops and strategic planning workshops are successful that has strengthened not only the staffs' assessment capacity, but also the whole organization. The staffs now can specify activities to be done for strengthening institutional capacity.

Savings mentality has developed among the group members and all members now saving money. Group members are now register

birth with Union Parishad regularly and cooperate neighbors to do so. Group members themselves participate in economically productive activities to save more and to be self-reliant.

Women's role and participation increased in family decision making and social activities. Women voters freely cast their vote in election. Women discuss with the hut committee and manage to allocate space for petty female vendors. Family-based barrier to women's voting right was eliminated, Women now feel encouraged to participate in UP elections. Participation of women in rally, meeting, and discussion has increased.

ACD is playing an important role in developing self-confidence of elected female UP members. They can identify now local problems and prepare project proposal for the consideration and approval of UP and Upazila levels. They maintain contact with Upazila officials and local people. They participate in development related meeting at local levels. They take active part in mobilizing birth registration practice. They expedite the process of Salish under the leadership of the UP Chairman on repression of women, polygamy, divorce, etc.

Impact of various programs can be highlighted as Capacity Building i.e. VDC members are conducting their meetings and developing their work plan; community people are identifying their problems and assessing their needs; VDC leaders are maintaining linkages with different service providers (GO & NGOs) to receive training supports like poultry rearing, goat rearing, fish cultivation, vegetable gardening, tree plantation, care and management etc.

Awareness on health hygiene among the community people has increased. They now cover their foods. They are now habituated to use their latrine. As a result the number of latrine are increasing in the working area and the attack of diarrhea is reducing day by day. The roads are now neat and clean compared to the previous situation.

Gender sensitivity develops among the VDC members. Male and female VDC members are sitting together and preparing village

development plan (VDP). Trained VDC members are creating awareness of gender sensitivity among the community people.

Awareness raising activities and campaign attained a considerable level of achievement. People are found well informed and vigilant with respect to social problems. People get the message of child rights, women's rights, human rights, violence against women and children, etc. Adolescent girls are also well aware of personal tactics and common sense regarding the social problems and child rights. Concerted efforts toward awareness raising in close cooperation of LEAs, local elite, and community people have given more acceptability of the issue to the vulnerable families. Regular meetings, workshops and consultation and visits make local people aware of the causes, mechanism, and consequences of various issues. They are now more prepared to face the traffickers and perpetrators both socially and psychologically.

They can now identify the areas of deprivation and exploitation in terms of the universal rights learned from training. They felt the need for a shelter home, day-night childcare centre, training centre, and savings for alternative income.

Following cases are some examples of positive impact of their activities on women

Sohagi Tudu (30) an indigenous girl of Kachua village of Pachondor union of Tanore Upazila. She worked in the field and with that income lived happily with her husband and three children. Suddenly her husband died in 7 days fever and Amnesia. After his death she faced the cruelty of the reality. She became a victim of brutal torture. Her wages cut to half. Men of her area threw ugly comment to her. She lived her life insecurely for three reasons, because she was poor, widow and indigenous women. In the night she could not go outside the room. No one of her area helped her. In 2000, when ACD formed group in the Pachondor Union Sohagi Tudu became a group member of ACD. She became aware by attending the weekly meeting on violence against women, early marriage, polygamy, divorce, dowry, human rights issues, gender balance,

equality in wages, democracy, empowerment of women Salish, etc. In 2003 group members made a decision to contest her in U.P. election. She won the election in heavy majority. Now she works for the rights of the indigenous people, prevention of violation occurred against them etc.

Majida Bibi lived with her husband Boitul) and her three children. Eight years ago poverty was common feature of landless Majida's life. Her husband was landlabour and with his little income it was barely impossible to maintain her family. When ACD began to work in the Srirampur village of Uttargram Union of Mohadevpur Thana of Nawgaon she was included as a group member of ACD in the Samiti. She took loan from ACD and bought a goat in that money. From that one goat she has now eleven goats of her own. Last few years she sold extra eight goats. She has become an owner of a piece of land and a house by her own income. She participates in the decision making process in the family as she earn money and know her rights. Her children go to school regularly. Her neighbors respect her. She sets an example in her village. Sufia, Abzan and Firoza of the village follow her example to improve their fate (Annual Report, 2002).

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to highlight the impact of the programs adopted by ACD and strategies followed by the same on vulnerable section of the society especially women. From the above discussion it has been found that living condition of women has improved. They became aware of child rights, women's rights and above an human rights. Women can now understand the reasons behind their present conditions and gain ability to initiate social movement against these cause especially violence against women. Saving mentality has also increased. They are now capable to specify activities for strengthening institutional capacity. In brief now they are more organized, self confident and powerful. The fact which, has been revealed this study is that women have been freed from the chain of their traditional role in family

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