

## Women-led collective actions on PGI

*Through their participation in the women squad and the CDMC, they can be the driving force to promote positive change in knowledge, attitude and practice in addressing social issues affecting their family and community. This would not be possible if their voices are not heard and taken seriously.*

### Introduction

The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) in partnership with the British Red Cross (BRC) have been working together to support community resilience through the Vulnerability to Resilience (V2R) programme since 2012 in various locations across the country. The V2R model follows the IFRC Framework for Community Resilience, and focuses primarily on DRR and disaster preparedness, livelihoods, WASH. Community engagement and accountability (CEA), protection gender and



*Women squad member discussing issues during courtyard session. Source: BDRCS.*

inclusion (PGI) and anti-trafficking (AT) are part of the cross-cutting elements of the project approach. For Phase 2, the V2R project has implemented development activities in 10 communities across the Teknaf sub-district of Cox's Bazar since 2019, of which covered 3,310 beneficiary family. In December 2022, we carried out three focus group discussions (FGD) with women who are active in the women squad and the community disaster management committee (CDMC). They are identified as agent for change for promoting CEA, PGI and AT in their community. This case study aims to understand the changes to their lives and the impact of their participation after receiving various awareness and empowerment sessions and implementing community-led activities.

### Content

#### *Increase confidence of the women squad members and CDMC female members*

They feel that their status in the family and in society has increased and their opinions are being valued and considered by others. Traditionally, it was difficult for women to voice their views in their family and in their community. When women were invited to participate in discussion and meeting, their husband or a male family member were answering on their behalf. They were often left out of decision making in their family or in their community. This has progressed significantly in the communities that the V2R project is working with. Women are now more active and able to contribute on their own without the company of a male family member. This is observed in their role in the women squad and CDMC. During these meetings, they were able to freely discuss about social issues that affected their lives and their community which are considered taboo or sensitive to talk about in the past, for instance domestic violence, gender-based violence, child marriage, human trafficking, and drug trafficking and drug addiction.



### *Putting a stop to child marriage, drug problems and domestic violence in the community*

A recent encounter was shared during the FGD where they were able to rescue a young girl and stop a child marriage few days ago. Under the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) of Bangladesh, the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18 years for a female and 21 years for a male. Although the trend is declining over the years, the country is still reported to have 38 million child brides, of which 13 million of them were married before the age of 15. Married girls are over four times more likely to be out of school than unmarried girls.<sup>1</sup> In the last four months, they have managed to stop two child marriages in their community.

They have also cooperated with the police to arrest suspected drug users and traffickers. The CDMC is monitoring and closing off areas where drug users and traffickers are seen gathering. They said many drug users used to return home and mistreated badly their wives, children and parents. They visited the home and counsel the family member who are using drugs. Corrective actions were agreed after counselling and discussion. They would involve the ward members of the area if the issue is not able to be resolved. They work closely with the CDMC and the local administration to create awareness and address the social issues collectively.

This would not be possible if their voices are not heard and taken seriously. Their roles are now being recognized by the community and they have often been called to resolve family conflicts and social problems in their community. They have observed a decline in such cases, but it could partly due to them being preoccupied with work after their family or them has received the cash assistance for livelihood support.

### *Referral pathway is available for enabling reporting of and confidential response to the case*

They are informed of the available referral pathway for reporting and responding to such social issues, and are familiar with the process of accessing referral services. They can reach out to the community organizers and the PGI officer to get assistance when needed. However, there are more needed to be done to create awareness of the services and to ensure the community members are comfortable to access them. Many people in the community are unable to differentiate aid and referral services. There are various NGOs and other service providers present in their community, offering food aid and cash assistance but these are not specific to the services available on the referral pathway.

For prevention of child marriage, they are aware that they can contact the DanChurchAid Bangladesh (DCA) and they will connect with the local administration ward members to resolve the issue. Sometimes they see cases where young boy and girl are running away to get married. They involved parents early in the process to help their children get the corrective measure needed.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh, UNICEF, New York, 2020.



Through the referral pathway, they were able to rescue a person who was kidnapped after 24 days and arrested a member of the trafficking gang.

In terms of confidentiality of using the referral services, they said this is usually handled well. Only few people who are involved in the case have access to the information and communication. However sometimes when the case is taken over by the service providers, they were not updated on the progress or how the issue is being resolved.

## **Lessons learned**

We recognize that women can play a critical role in promoting and ensuring social cohesion and a communicator to facilitate conversation between family members. When given the opportunity to identify and develop their capacity and to participate in decision making process, they can create an equally impactful change as compared to the men in their community. We can further enhance their role in supporting the access to and the response process of the referral pathway, as the majority of referred cases are female who would feel more assured knowing that they can get social/emotional support from the women squad and the CDMC female members.

## **Contact information**

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