

COMILLA UNIVERSITY'S POLICY OF ZERO TOLERANCE TOWARDS SEXUAL HARASSMENT

VALIDATION WORKSHOP AT COMILLA UNIVERSITY, CUMILLA

On 9 December 2020, more than 100 students, teachers and administrative staff from Comilla University participated in a workshop to validate the **Policy of Zero Tolerance Towards Sexual Harassment**. The policy was developed through a consultation process that engaged students, teachers and the university administration and drew from the findings of *A Research on Gender Friendly Universities in Bangladesh: The Baseline Study of Comilla University* that was conducted in 2019.

The study focused on identifying the nature, types, prevalence and impact of sexual harassment and other forms of violence around the campus and to identify the existing institutional redress mechanisms. The research found that there is a high prevalence of sexual harassment and other forms of violence on campus as more than four out of every five female students experienced at least one form of sexual harassment on campus in their lifetime and more than two out of every three female students experienced violence within the campus in the last 12 months.

Because of the high prevalence of SH and other forms of violence observed on campus by students, the institutional redress mechanism is to be strengthened by making the Complaint Committee functional, by developing a policy of zero tolerance towards sexual harassment to strengthen the referral mechanism in place, to roll out bystander programmes and other behavioural change initiatives through an expert pool of trainers and to conduct awareness-raising on gender-based violence, violence against women and sexual harassment within the academic studies curriculum.

The workshop was organized as part of the Combatting Gender-Based Violence Project in Bangladesh (CGBV), funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by the WE CAN Alliance with educational institutions across the districts of Comilla, Bogura and Patuakhali. Through this Project, a 'whole-of-school' approach to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and other forms of violence on campus has been implemented. This approach has been bringing institutional and individual behavioural change across all university sectors, from the highest management level down to the administrative staff, to teachers and, most importantly, to students.

After elaborating the sexual harassment policy for Comilla University, the next step is to implement the policy effectively. The capacity of the staff and teachers needs to develop, and we need to ensure that reforms are put in place to attain a safe and harassment-free campus.

– Md. Ashaduzzaman, Treasurer,
Comilla University

To ensure high-level management commitment, the workshop was officially inaugurated by Professor Emran Kabir Chowdhury, Vice Chancellor of Comilla University, and by Shoko Ishikawa, UN Women Country Representative.

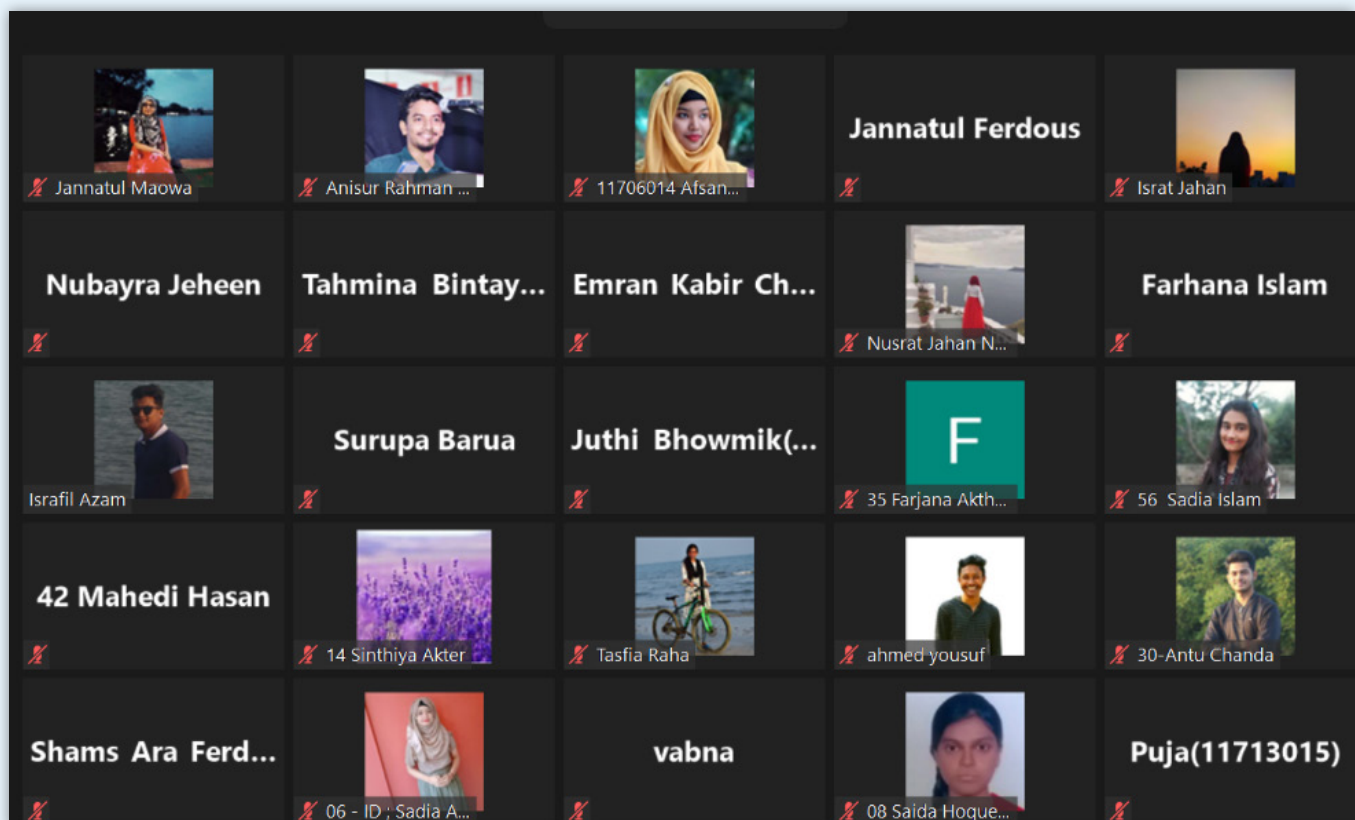
During the workshop, it was pointed out that the sexual harassment policy is an example of institutional change aimed at achieving a campus free from violence. The policy is aligned with Bangladesh's international commitment and is informed by a survivor-centred approach that provides prevention interventions by encouraging students to become change-makers. The policy promotes peer-to-peer support as a mechanism for recognizing and stopping sexual harassment and other forms of violence on campus. Coupled with that, the policy also provides detailed guidelines on how to file a complaint, how to undertake an investigation and how to secure protection from retaliation.

Farzana Sultana, the Donor Representative and Development Advisor of Global Affairs Canada, noted that “this policy will show Comilla University’s compliance with the 2009 High Court Directive on Sexual Harassment”.

Recommendations from the participants included ensuring the involvement of teachers, students and duty-bearers in implementing the policy effectively, while incorporating the action plan recommended in the *Research on Gender Friendly Universities in Bangladesh: The Baseline Study of Comilla University*. To make it more relevant and understandable for the students, teachers and administrative staff of Comilla University, the Policy was developed in Bangla for wider dissemination. The Policy will be launched and disseminated among students, teachers and university administrative staff across the campus and will be effectively monitored by the Complaints Committee that was revamped and supported through the Combatting Gender-Based Violence Project.

As the family is the first institution where children learn, children follow their parents, but in our society, children also observe different types of violence in their homes. To prevent violence against women and sexual harassment, there should be some initiative to engage with parents in the programme that can contribute substantially to reducing gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

– Ahnaf Shahriar, student at Comilla University.



Participants at the validation workshop on the Zero Tolerance Policy towards Sexual Harassment at Comilla University on 9 December 2020. Photo credit: UN Women.