

SURVIVOR-CENTRED SERVICES: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LAW, JUSTICE AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE SERVICE PROVIDERS OF PATUAKHALI DISTRICT

On the occasion of International Human Rights Day 2020, Christian Aid and UN Women organized a discussion on violence against women and children and the state of survivor-centred legal services in Patuakhali district with legal and CSO service providers on 10 December 2020. In continuation of the 16 Days of Activism campaign, a total of 40 representatives (14 females, 26 males) from the Bangladesh police, BLAST, ASK, the judiciary, CSOs and journalists attended the event to find out about the root cause of non-services or the delayed service of legal aid to the GBV survivors and to find a way to assist the survivors of Patuakhali district.

The chief guest Md Lutfur Rahman, Senior Assistant Judge, Patuakhali District Judge Court, and special guest Mohammad Mahfuzur Rahman, Additional Superintendent of Police, together with other local government officials and NGO representatives, attended the event. Farhana Afroz, Christian Aid, moderated the session.

The Additional Superintendent of Police informed the participants that the Patuakhali district police has established a 'women's help desk' in all nine Upazila, a commitment made by Mujib Borsho 2020 whereby female police staff are deployed in remote police stations in the district.

During the discussion, the participants reiterated the fact that women faced many difficulties in accessing legal support because of delays in the judicial system, lack of knowledge about legal procedures and services and abuse of power by legal service providers and other responsible persons. While sharing their personal experiences, the participants expressed their grievances regarding the vicious cycle of polygamy, the lack of transparency in birth registration and child marriage registration, and the deferred proceedings of the judicial system – all of which are the main causes of violence against women in the district.

An increase in domestic violence against women and children has occurred due to the unemployment of both women and their husbands during the COVID pandemic after both lost their livelihoods. There were 42 VAW-related cases reported in the local media and 450 GBV survivors approached Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) for legal support between April and November 2020. 62 out of these 450 cases were referred to the district police for taking legal actions. The Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) representative, Advocate Abu Bakar Siddiqui, stated that BLAST had provided 120 legal counselling cases to GBV survivors from July – November 2020 in the district. The Executive Director of Patuakhali Suktara Mahila Unnayan Sangstha (PSMUS), Mahfuja Islam, stated that CSOs like ASK, BLAST and



Welcome speech by Additional Superintendent of Police Mohammad Mahfuzur Rahman. Photo credit: Christian Aid

I like this kind of awareness-raising meeting very much and always try to give time to this initiative. Violence against women is on the rise. At the police station, we are trying to provide services to women by women. But women must protest their own oppression. Language needs to be reformed when talking to women. The police station has a separate desk to prevent violence against women and children. Its staff are instructed to treat everyone equally there.

– Mohammad Mahfuzur Rahman,
Additional Superintendent of Police
Patuakhali District



Chief guest Md Lutfur Rahman, Senior Assistant Judge, Patuakhali District Judge Court sharing his views during the discussion. Photo Credit: UN Women

In his speech, the Chief Guest Md Lutfur Rahman, Senior Assistant Judge, Patuakhali District Judge Court, stated that currently GBV survivors are facing two types of violence: actual violence and systemic judicial violence. He suggested creating awareness among district judges on providing survivor-centred services on a priority basis and said that a guideline for the notary public should be provided on the need to follow the Notary Act that needs to be revised. Proper mechanisms should be in place to monitor the Kabin registration (marriage registration) by multiple agencies (e.g. Islamic registrars and civil court) and to build awareness about the scope and responsibilities of each role in preventing child marriage.



Birth registration is very important for a person. This means that when someone comes to us for birth registration, we examine all the supportive documents like the vaccination card and school education certificate. Non-registration of a marriage is one of the causes of violence against women. This means a marriage should be registered. Families should be aware about this issue. Inequality between girls and boys starts in the home. Therefore, sensitizing parents about giving each child equal treatment is very important. It is possible to stop the abuse of women and children if we act from our respective positions.

– **Md. Delwar Hossain, Mayoral Representative and Councillor of Patuakhali Municipality**



PSMUS are working with the Department of Women's Affairs to prevent child marriage, but their efforts are unsuccessful since poor vulnerable girls are married off due to increased levels of poverty and losses of livelihood.

BLAST has advocated for online General Diary (GD) filing that can ensure access to legal justice as since the lockdown the in-person service provision of GD filing was suspended. But here too the police force is reluctant to continue online GD filing as the authenticity of the complaint cannot be verified.

Moreover, lawyers and GBV survivors need to be sensitized on family law cases to ensure justice is delivered. Md. Mahamudul Hasan, Additional Public Prosecutor, Patuakhali District Judge Court, emphasized this point when he mentioned that everyone needed to be aware of when the new law came into effect as many judges were not aware of the new legislation, such as the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act 2010. It is possible to reduce VAW if everyone fulfils their own responsibilities within the framework of their own professions in an open and effective manner.

The Ward Counsellor, Deloar Hossain Akon, mentioned that families should be aware about the impact of child marriage and parents, especially fathers, should be sensitized on proper parenting to prevent VAW and to end the practice of child marriage.

In his closing remarks, Sirajul Islam, Programme Director of Society Development Agency (SDA), emphasized that Patuakhali district has become a trafficking zone due to child marriage and drug peddling. As there is a lack of female friendly spaces in the Court, most of the GBV survivors do not feel comfortable continuing to engage in the long proceedings of Court cases. The group suggested sensitizing the lawyers and judges to ensure easy access to legal services for GBV survivors through the judiciary system. Coordination between governmental and non-governmental organizations is essential to create public awareness on violence against women, and to create a women friendly environment in the legal system so as to reduce the level of violence against women.