

IMPLEMENTING A COMPLEX GBV PREVENTION PROJECT

SUMMARY

UN Women Bangladesh has been implementing the Combatting Gender-Based Violence (CGBV) project in Bangladesh through a donor agreement with Government of Canada (2018-2023). The project has been working in the three districts of Cumilla, Bogura and Patuakhali with the goal of reducing violence against women (VAW) at home, at work and in public spaces. The three project outcomes focused on the strengthening of laws and policies, promoting favorable social norms, attitudes, and behaviors to prevent VAW and improving knowledge and evidence on VAW prevention.

The CGBV project is complex and ambitious, involving eight different intervention strategies – including several adapted from external program models - at national, district and community levels, four implementing organizations and partnerships with district government, tertiary level educational institutions, and factories. The project, while showing some promising outputs, has been marked with a number of circumstantial and structural delays such as the COVID-19 Pandemic, cumbersome bureaucratic processes at multiple levels within the project ecosystem. There are key lessons around how to ensure contextual relevance and local engagement in project planning and intervention design and adaptation, and the importance of ensuring adequate human and financial resources to implement interventions to the quality and intensity needed.

INTRODUCTION

This Learning Brief reflects on the *Combatting Gender-Based Violence (CGBV)* project implemented by UN Women Bangladesh since April 2018. The project was implemented in three districts (Bogura, Cumilla, Patuakhali) with the goal of reducing violence against women (VAW) at home, at work and in public spaces.

The project has been executed through implementing partners and local experts, through collaboration with government and educational institutions, the private sector and international technical advisors. The approach of the project was to address multi-level determinants of gender-based violence within local communities and at institutional and structural levels. Interventions aimed to address individual attitudes and behaviours, family relationships, gender inequitable social norms, workplace dynamics within both industrial and governmental settings, school-based culture, as well as policy and legal frameworks. The three project outcomes are:

1. National and local laws and policies to prevent violence against women are strengthened, if needed, and implemented.
2. Favourable social norms, attitudes and behaviours are promoted to prevent violence against women and enhance women's economic empowerment.
3. Policy and programming are increasingly informed by an expanded knowledge base on effective approaches to prevention of violence against women.

Based on a learning review of the CGBV project, this brief brings together reflections and lessons learned in four key areas: (i) The project ecosystem and knowledge transfer; (ii) Intervention design and adaptation; (iii) implementation and (iv) project management.



Female factory participants in the workplace intervention in Bogura

ECOSYSTEM & KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

As with many internationally funded projects, the UN Women CGBV project has, from its inception phase, incorporated multiple levels of stakeholders, contributors, partners, and recipients that are globally and culturally diverse. This matrix of stakeholders and interests ranges from the political, value-based approach of the donor body (Government of Canada) and main partner UN Women Bangladesh to the national and local civil society implementing organizations and community members at the receiving end of interventions in intervention villages in Bangladesh. It is also connected to different global locations where intervention models were developed or previously implemented (e.g., Uganda, Nepal) or where international consultants who have supported project design and learning are based.

The project assumed that a large international actor, such as a UN agency would be better positioned to engage in a project of this scale, as well as the ability to sustain and manage sufficient funds through agreements with foreign government donors, compared with local civil society organizations. Hence, an agreement between Government of Canada and UN Women was the primary catalyst for this initiative.

There are important cultural and structural implications of this interlocking, and often imbalanced, matrix of relationships for the nature of programming and activities to be implemented. While this can enrich and expand project approaches, it can also, at times, create challenges in developing shared expectations, adapting approaches to local contexts, monitoring implementation, evaluating results and maintaining quality and oversight over intervention outcomes.



Photo: SASA! Together Community Leaders Session - Bogura

It is useful to look at how knowledge is transferred and exchanged, power is distributed, and programming decisions are made across the multiple levels and dimensions of such an ecosystem. This section draws on the experience of the CGBV project and reflects on a number of key questions:

1. How are programming content and intervention models imported and adapted for implementation within local contexts? How are such decisions made? What is the level of engagement of recipient communities in such decisions?

Sector professionals and practitioners are exposed to various models and methodologies from different contexts globally for the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV). Many of these are presented as being “evidence-based”, “tried and tested” or “evaluated through large RCT studies” or other characteristics that imply that they “work”. Such assessments usually take place within the same context where such models are developed and implemented, and measure defined indicators of change and impact in those contexts including a reduction in the prevalence of specific forms of GBV as well as risk factors for that violence.

There is a growing body of learning which shows that while the transfer of such interventions to different cultural, geographical, and socio-economic contexts is a legitimate approach, it also requires an elaborate and thoughtful process of adaptation and re-imagining. A process that goes beyond language translation and visual aids and delves deeper into a cultural look at relationship and family dynamics that could fundamentally look different than those in the source culture, workplace ethics, faith based value systems, and the political and economic environments that affect social norms and behaviors. An investment that, if measured against the alternative approach of designing a fully home-grown intervention, may or may not be feasible within existing resources and timeframes¹.

2. How far do implemented projects diverge from the original interventions, and from adapted models? Why does such a gap exist?

Recent learning suggests that, in practice, projects implemented in new contexts often diverge considerably from the original interventions, frequently in terms of intensity and implementation quality². This is partly dependent on the level and amount of investment (in financial resources, time, expertise, etc.) in both the adaptation and implementation process, which inevitably determines the shape of the final product and how much it resembles and is ‘faithful’ to the original interventions developed and implemented in their original contexts (e.g., SASA! in Uganda vs. SASA! in Bangladesh)³. However, it also reflects attempts to ensure interventions are relevant to the local socio-cultural, economic, and political context, including social structures and institutions and the needs and aspirations of those they target. This might also affect what outcomes are considered as a success over what time period⁴.

3. Is local ownership, and hence longevity of effort, a goal of the project? If so, how would this be achieved within such an ecosystem?

1 The companion Learning Reviews on adaptation of the SASA! Together and Stepping Stones interventions as part of the Bangladesh CGBV Project look at these issues.

2 Relevant supporting argument in the Raising Voices summery brief (2018): Learning from SASA! Adaptations in Diverse Contexts: A summary brief. https://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/AdaptationsSASA_AllContextsSum.pdf

3 <https://salamandertrust.net/project/cusp-community-for-understanding-scale-up-case-studies-stepping-stones/>

4 The companion Learning Reviews on adaptation of the SASA! Together and Stepping Stones interventions as well as the SOSJ intervention as part of the Bangladesh CGBV Project look at these issues.

When local community participants in the Bangladesh CGBV Project were asked what would happen when the project ends, they unanimously said they will continue with the engagement and effort to educate themselves and influence others to keep building healthier relationships and violence-free communities. None, however, could identify how this would happen without the continuous support and funding of organizations such as UN Women and national and local implementing partners.

Although the desire to keep such programming going is strong among stakeholders, the decision to do so, within current sector practices and international development environment often lies within the hands of donors, UN agencies or (I)NGOs. Although project evaluations and practitioner knowledge from the field may influence such decisions, they are still unidirectional and top down, and there are multiple examples globally of where project funding ends and the positive changes that have started are not sustained or expanded.

4. How would political and strategic changes within donor governments and UN agencies influence long term visions of such interventions?

Funding priorities and sources have been significantly impacted by political and economic changes within donor countries, and to a lesser extent INGO priorities and economic and political volatility among host societies. Gender transformative efforts are by nature, long term and require commitment, step by step processes of change, scale-up strategies and constant re-evaluation and adaptation, which can only exist within sustainable project planning and guaranteed longevity.

The Bangladesh CGBV Project, for example, and as it stands in late 2022, and considering changing timelines and delays both due to COVID-19 and bureaucratic processes, would ideally be seen as first phase of a long and sustained effort to create meaningful transformative change towards combatting gender-based violence in the communities and institutions with which it has worked.

5. What does evaluation and measuring results look like with changing scope, resources, and timeline?

The CGBV project aims, eventually and in its long term stated impact, to create change in behaviour and social norms, through a multitude of activities engaging a number of stakeholders. Measuring social behaviour change on the level of gender norms, core values and attitudes and gender dynamics, is long term, subjective and slow. A distinction needs to be made between evaluating the efficacy of the results framework implementation through measuring the level to which activities were conducted, and assessing actual impact on norms and behaviours. In the CGBV project, it was decided to conduct a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) on interventions that were relatively short term and involves small numbers of target stakeholders. It is impossible to determine change in values and behaviour within weeks of conducting intervention activities.

For an RCT to provide robust evidence on whether a gender transformative intervention works, data needs to be collected on indicators of this change, such as incidents of GBV over a reasonable period of time, rates of change in girls' education, women's access to financial resources, and other quality of life indicators. And since such CGBV projects target society wide social change (that also includes policies, structures, and institutions), its impact is not mean to be only observed on the specific limited group of participants in program activities, but rather at a community level at minimum. This means that both experimental and comparison groups would be impacted by the program, and hence cannot (and should not) be compared independently.

INTERVENTION DESIGN AND ADAPTATION

The principal approach of the UN Women CGBV project was to adapt a number of interventions that were tried and tested in other contexts, including within Bangladesh (e.g., the workplace intervention) and in different cultural contexts (e.g., SASA! Together and Stepping Stones) with some documented levels of success. A process of rationale building was conducted to identify the needs and suitability of such interventions before starting the adaptation and implementation process. The validity of adapting foreign models that are supported by some evidence of success in different cultural context, vs. building on and improving locally produced ones that partners are more competent and experienced in implementing, is a key area for a comparative review that could provide insight and guidance for future projects. And an analysis on the suitability of the selected external interventions to the goals of the Bangladesh UN Women CGBV project was conducted at the beginning of the project.

Furthermore, the multi-dimensional nature of the CGBV project, with interventions targeting community members, activists and leaders, families, universities, workplace environments and district government bodies, makes it difficult to assess the efficiency of adaptation and implementation processes – and how different interventions combined in practice - towards achieving the overall intended outcomes of the CGBV Project. For example, adaptations of SASA! Together and Stepping Stones have been implemented in the same 12 villages, but it is unclear how they were intended to work together to produce change, and how this is being measured in practice.

Additionally, the different interventions – at community, district, and national levels - are meant to collectively, and quite ambitiously, contribute to the overall goal of VAWG prevention in Bangladesh. However, in several cases, these interventions are not co-located (e.g., community and colleges-based interventions) and hence cannot have a combined effect in practice. Furthermore, the relatively short period of actual implementation (due to a multitude of delaying factors, including COVID - 19 restrictions) meant that further planning and programming is necessary to see the impact of these various interventions on social norm and behavior change and, ultimately, the reduction of VAW.

Nonetheless, a significant amount of investment in knowledge transfer, capacity building, partnership development and community engagement has been done throughout the 5 years project cycle. The project has also produced adapted guides, curricula, and materials for several interventions, which are an asset for the future. Overall, this cumulates a reservoir of experience and knowledge that would be invaluable to build on for future efforts.

IMPLEMENTATION - OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Partnerships developed with national and local implementing partners facilitate access to and contextual knowledge of diverse local contexts whether through community groups, educational institutions or public and private workplace environments. The CGBV project was able to reach participants and stakeholders in remote districts and villages that might not have otherwise been targets for such efforts. As such it tried to connect global experiences and methods with lived realities of local populations in 12 Bangladeshi villages. This access and the opportunities it provided in Bangladesh is a strength that is clearly offered through such partnerships between a UN agency like UN Women and local organizations at national and community levels.

There is also a clear thirst among community members to engage in transformative programs and activities that would contribute to healthier and violent-free relationships. And while this could also be observed in different levels within private sector workplace environments (e.g., factories) and educational institutions, government employees were less enthusiastic and engaged. Government bureaucracy, lack of coordination and partnership with apex bodies of government and meaningful interest by officials seem to have contributed to inadequate engagement and support on the implementation level. The learning style and methodology implemented in government departments lacked awareness of that particular context and how/why employees would engage in such activities.

Both national and local implementing partners are an asset and vital to any effort to combat gender-based violence in the country. That being said, the long path through the elaborate ecosystem of knowledge transfer does pose a challenge for skills, tools and methodologies to be “lost in translation”. This learning review had illustrated how difficult it is to guarantee fair and accurate implementation of global interventions, such as SASA! and SOSJ with the level of investment, resources, and complex relationship matrix such as the one that have in this CGBV project. And in a manner that ensures the adaptation of such models to the environment we are working within without losing sight of the intended impact outlined in the results framework.

On a programmatic level, and while activities might not all get completed as planned due to unforeseeable delays, budget planning needs to match the changes in project cycle activities.

INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES TO PROJECT CYCLE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

A project management (PM) approach to project cycle design and planning provides structured guidelines for operational schedules and implementation frameworks. UN Women, GAC and national partners all seem to have strong PM abilities. UN Women designed a timeline that aligns with the environment within Bangladesh and available resources. As in most projects of this scale, the reality of implementation almost never matches the plan.

While COVID-19 conditions posed the most apparent and impactful challenge to commitment to the planned project cycle, other institutional and structural challenges, typical in the international development sector, provides an opportunity for reflection and learning, and hopefully improvement.

The INGO environment often relies on individual characteristics and personal investment and approaches; it also leads to disruptions in plan flow when there is change in leadership or among key personnel. Viability of relationship and partnership building on an institutional level are also impacted by personality traits. Gaps in hiring, lack of smooth transition and additional effort needed to transfer knowledge among key team members all contribute to impeding progress and inevitably, the quality of programming. And while none of this is unique to the Bangladesh CGBV project, the review provides opportunities for reflection and identification of areas that could provide viable examples of better institutional structures.

LESSONS LEARNED – THE WAY FORWARD

Streamlining Project Ecosystems

The complex matrix of stakeholders, processes and relationships involved in creating a large project such as the CGBV can make project management extremely challenging. While a considerable amount of home grown knowledge and experience often exists on the national and local levels, the practice of adapting evidence driven modules and solutions has become dominant recently. Looking inwards, through the lens of experienced local actors might prove more beneficial and efficient. This does not undermine the value of international experience and global experts but reverses its order of influence from primary to secondary.

Institutionalization of Processes

Individuals, especially those in leadership positions are elemental in moving the agenda forward and driving the organizational vision of and managing projects. However, over-reliance on particular personnel in retaining institutional memory and experience, and executing administrative actions poses high risks to the project progress due to unplanned changes in staffing. Decision making authority, overlapping of knowledge and experiences, as well as change management should be systemized within the organization regardless of personnel.

Intersectional and Complementary Approaches

While ‘Behavior Change’ is one approach to combating gender-based violence, it often does not respond to multi-layered determinants of unhealthy social norms, such as political and economic factors, health conditions, personal wealth, education and the environment.

World Bank data show considerably lower rates of female participation in labor force than males, lower female literacy rates, higher employment vulnerability for females, much less financial literacy and independence of women than men, among other indicators showing power imbalance and gender inequality risk factors⁵.

International and national actors (including UN agencies and donors) should look at strengthening comprehensive strategies that identify and address the intersectionality of economic conditions, education, health provision, legal structures, policies, and political conditions as well as social and cultural contexts. This would require collaborations and partnerships between actors with diverse mandates and approaches. In the case of Bangladesh, as an example, the Government’s National Action Plan⁶ could be a baseline for a national framework to combating gender-based violence, that is locally owned and led (with resources and support from international actors), that has government and national leadership support.

5 [Bangladesh - World Bank Gender Data Portal](#)

6 Government of Bangladesh’s 8th Five Year Plan, *National Women Development Policy and the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children (NAP-VAW) 2018-2030*

Oversight and monitoring of processes and progress

Clear parameters need to be in place for quality control and performance of partners and implementers, within all levels of the ecosystem, where roles, deliverables and milestones are outlined throughout the project cycle to reduce subjectivity and potential conflict, and more importantly, to ensure that implemented activities on the frontline reflects original interventions with integrity.

Resource Allocation

The learning review had provided insight on the inadequate allocation of funds and human resources as well as time, for the number of activities as they are prescribed by the original intervention models, and the intended outcomes and impact. Prevention programming and work is a marathon not a sprint, and without adequate intentional intensity and sustained investment, it is difficult to ensure the efficacy of interventions, let alone assess and measure results.

This also means budgeting for unexpected threats to the process (e.g., delays, structural institutional changes, and political disruptions), having more flexibility in time allocations and extensions, as well as, and more importantly, sector wide collaborations, partnerships and building on each other's work, rather than trying to reproduce existing knowledge and recreate existing efforts.

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