

16 Days of Activism Fair at the University of Comilla Edutainment to end GBV



Student Volunteers take a breather amidst the busy fair day

On December 10th 2019, UN Women and Naripokkho, supported by their implementing partners, Prottoy and BLAST, coordinated a 16 Days of Activism fair at the University of Comilla to raise awareness about ending gender-based violence. Almost 400 students (230 males and 150 females) were engaged over the course of the day to mobilize peer-to-peer advocacy, with a variety of activities—ranging from film screenings to student debates—focusing on awareness raising and capacity building in support of alternative masculinities and transformation of gender relations to prevent sexual violence.

The Fair was organised under the umbrella of the ‘16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence’, which kicked off on 25th November 2019 and the UN Secretary General’s UNiTE to end Violence against Women Campaign. This year’s UN theme was “Orange The World: Gender Equality Stands Against Rape”,

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to highlight the need to end the rape culture that is entrenched in our society, including our educational institutions.

The 16 Days Fair Day engaged students through “edutainment”, activities designed to simultaneously educate and entertain, to discuss issues around the root causes of GBV and jointly discuss possible solutions moving forward. Whilst sexual violence is a sensitive and difficult subject to broach, important concepts surrounding the pervasive nature of “rape culture” were unpacked through interactive activities such as signing pledges for the Clothesline



The VC of Comilla University and chief guest, Dr Emran Kabir, pledges to stand against sexual harassment as part of the Clothesline Project



The MCs presenting the sessions

Project on campus, student debates, film screenings, theatre performances, mixed sports and youth-led entrepreneurship's.

The day was inaugurated by a speech from the University Vice Chancellor, Mr. Imran Kabir Chowdhury, who heralded the importance of youth rising to the occasion to end gender inequality. "Today I see women across all sectors in Bangladesh and beyond, and often exceeding their male peers," said Mr. Chowdhury. "With active participation from both genders, we can see an end to detrimental practices and the beginning of a new fair generation."

To unpack deeply entrenched and internalized values and beliefs regarding gender roles and stereotypes, the 16 Days Fair aimed to reinforce messaging through a variety of platforms. To raise awareness about gender equality, students were invited to write pledges, opinions or experiences on violence and gender inequality on T-shirts, and hang them on a clothesline ("The Clothesline Project"). The Clothesline Project will be a permanent fixture at the university, serving as a reminder of the students' vision on this day: ending violence against women and achieving gender equality. As part of further awareness raising strategies, students participated in a debate about whether our society is committed to preventing sexual violence, engaged in a friendly game of mixed doubles badminton, and ran a cultural program that included monologues, poetry, street theatre, musical drama and dance performances. The overall message was that women are not subordinate or inferior to men in their homes, at university or in the broader society.

Throughout the year, UN Women also ran two competitions to build capacity of our youth to create innovative tools to promote behavior change, both of which culminated at the Fair Day. As part of UN Women's "Innovators Against Gender Based Violence

"It was a heart-warming experience to groom young male non-film enthusiasts to craft short films directed to fight gender imbalances in a patriarchal society" - Shameem Akhtar, film director.

Competition" (IAGBV Competition), young women innovators developed ideas to identify solutions to end violence against women. Two winning teams were selected to launch their innovations at the Fair Day. Team Sanctum and Team Revive took to the stage to explain their products—a workplace sexual harassment training module and sustainable cloth sanitary napkin for GBV survivors—and in doing so shattered the silence regarding gender-based violence, sexual harassment in the workplace and menstrual hygiene.



A scene from the musical drama "Chhitrangoda", performed by the students of the university's cultural club

The young males weren't far behind, with 6 aspiring male filmmakers launching their short films as part of a UN Women #HeForShe film competition. Film director Shameem Akhtar, who led many of the trainings and bootcamps for the aspiring filmmakers, said "it was a heart-warming experience to groom young male non-film enthusiasts to craft short films directed to fight gender imbalances in a patriarchal society".

As the day wrapped up and the students began drifting away in groups, snippets of conversations among peers could be overheard; conversations about gender roles, violence against women and sexual harassment. The action-packed Fair Day demonstrates how media and the arts can be wielded as a powerful tool by youth to challenge internalized beliefs and values that fuel, normalize or tolerate gender-based violence, and is a testament to the power of youth as agents for change.