



Advancing Women's Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh: Successes and Lessons Learned

2016 - 2019



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This booklet is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It was prepared by The Carter Center for the Advancing Women's Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh Project, Cooperative Agreement #AID-388-A-16-00003. The contents are the responsibility of The Carter Center and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

FOREWORD

We live in a time in which information can be more readily shared than ever before. Yet, for many women, the power of information remains an aspiration rather than a reality. In Bangladesh, a 2015 mixed-methods study conducted by The Carter Center with support from the Manusher Jonno Foundation in six districts found that women are not able to exercise their fundamental right to information with the same frequency, ease and rate of success as their male counterparts. It further identified the greatest obstacles to women's equal access to information, as well as the broad thematic types of information that would be most valuable to women if they were able to overcome these obstacles. Based on recommendations developed by a high-level working group composed of right to information practitioners and advocates, government representatives, members of the international donor community and others, The Carter Center developed the Advancing Women's Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh project, generously funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The Center began implementation in August 2016, and over the last three years, we have seen much progress in the furtherance of women's access to information in our program areas in Dhaka, Khagrachari and Sylhet. In coordination with our government counterparts at the Cabinet Division (Coordination and Reforms) and the Information Commission, along with our civil society partners Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI), Trinamul Unnayan Sangstha (TUS) and the Institute of Development Affairs (IDEA), we have worked to increase awareness of the right to information and its importance to transforming women's lives, to improve the capacity to both seek and provide information, and to support a more favorable legal and cultural environment for women using the Right to Information Act of 2009. The Tottho Bondhus and Changemakers have been instrumental in assisting women in making requests, and their efforts are notable. Without the leadership of women, such as MJF Executive Director Shaheen Anam and The Carter Center Chief of Party Sumana Mahmud, these successes would not have been possible. We thank these partners and counterparts for their important work and demonstrated strong commitments to improving women's access to information.

As a result of our programming, we have seen positive changes in the attitudes of government officials and interest of civil society groups and women regarding the right to information. While we recognize that more work is required, we are confident that the programmatic impacts will continue to resonate with local communities, and that the ongoing good-faith efforts of those involved in improving women's access to information will help Bangladesh move closer to an equitable right to information for all of its citizens. The Carter Center is proud of the accomplishments that we have achieved alongside our partners and the courageous women requesters, and we remain committed to continuing our support so that women may access life-changing information.



Ambassador (ret.) Mary Ann Peters
Chief Executive Officer
The Carter Center

BACKGROUND & PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Women's rights are human rights. The equal enjoyment of the benefits of culture and citizenship, regardless of gender, is a fundamental guarantee. Yet reality is a stark reminder of the gap between aspiration and practice, as many of the most basic rights, including the right of access to information, remain elusive for half of the world's population.

Since 1999, the Carter Center's Rule of Law Program (formerly Global Access to Information Program) has been actively engaged in advancing the right of access to information, a fundamental human right necessary for the exercise of other essential rights. Access to information is the foundation upon which governments promote transparency, encourage participation and make public administration more effective and efficient. Though a universal right, the Center identified that considerable gender asymmetries exist, serving to exclude women from information flows.

To begin addressing this issue, The Carter Center sought to demonstrate the hypothesis that women are not able to exercise the right to information with same frequency, ease and rate of success as men. Applying a mixed-methods study in 2015, developed by the Center and initially applied in Liberia and Guatemala and contextualized for Bangladesh, the Center with its partner Manusher Jonno Foundation not only assessed whether women are able to exercise the right to information with the same facility as men but also identified the main obstacles facing women in accessing information and the types of information most critical to women for economic empowerment and the protection of rights. Conducted in Dhaka, Khagrachari, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Sylhet, the results of the study were presented to a group of high-level stakeholders made up of government, civil society, the international donor and implementing partner community, journalists and others. Following the presentation, a subset of those in attendance were invited to participate in a series of smaller working groups to consider possible ways to overcome the obstacles identified by the study to women's access to information as identified by the study. Those recommendations were collected, synthesized and used to guide the development of the Advancing Women's Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh program. What follows is a description of the Center and its partners efforts over the last three years to improve women's access to information in Bangladesh.

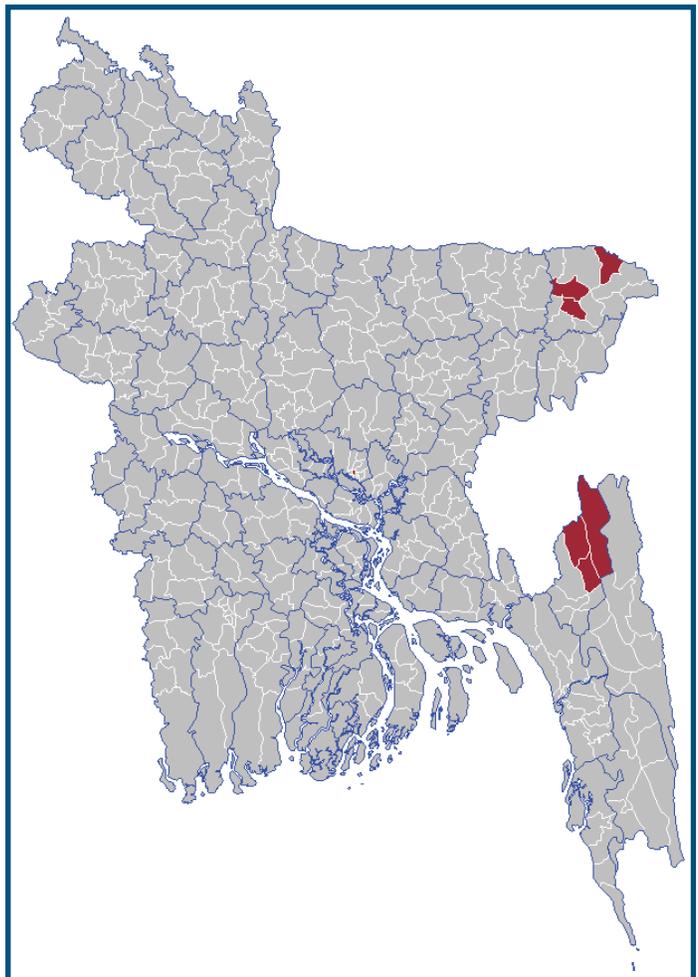
With the generous support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in August 2016, The Carter Center began The Advancing Women's Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh program to ensure that women in Bangladesh may more meaningfully exercise the right of access to information and transform their lives. In collaboration with the Manusher Jonno Foundation, implementing partners were selected to work in target districts of Dhaka, Khagrachari and Sylhet. The local partners, chosen because of their experience with the right to information and their strong community connections, were Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI), Trinamul Unnayan Sangstha (TUS), and the Institute of Development Affairs (IDEA), respectively. In addition to working with civil society, the Center's program has engaged with select Government of Bangladesh ministries and bodies, particularly those most relevant to women's right to information.

To accomplish the overall goal of improving women’s access to information, the Center and its partners worked towards achieving three mutually reinforcing objectives:

1. The legal and social environment in Bangladesh is more enabling of women’s access to information;
2. National and target local governments more effectively and equitably provide information to women in target districts; and
3. Civil society organizations and information liaisons in target districts advance women’s use of the right of access to information.

To assess the impact of programming in our target areas, the Center partnered with BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University to conduct a perception-based baseline and endline assessment, interviewing 300 respondents.

While analysis of the endline survey is ongoing, preliminary results shows that 93% of respondents in program areas indicate that women in their communities are filing more information requests than three years ago. Further, while 5% of the respondents who have participated in some form of programming led by the Center and its partners indicate that they had filed an information request prior to this program, almost 22% percent indicated that they have filed information requests following participation in program activities. Of those people, 65% indicate that they shared that information with members of their families, households, and communities.



The working areas under the *Advancing Women's Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh* project.

OBJECTIVE ONE:

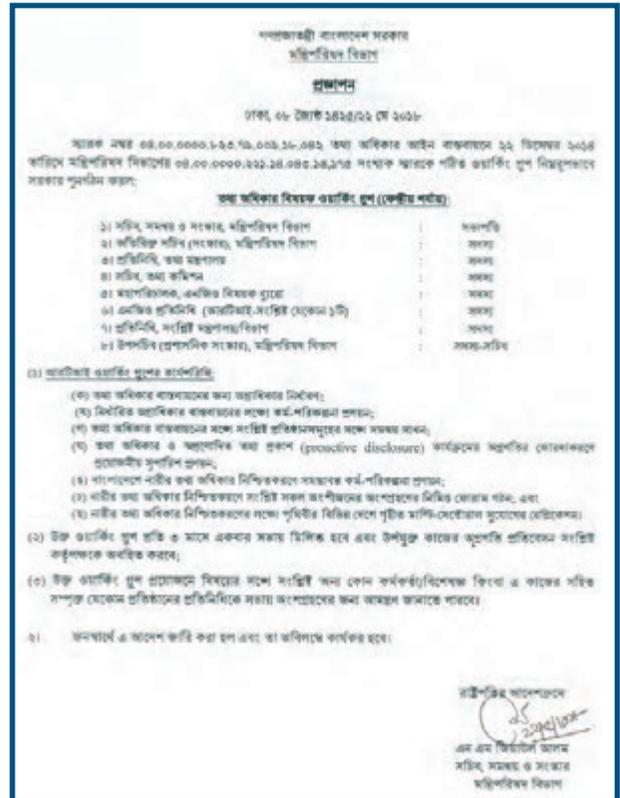
Furthering a more enabling legal and social environment

Right to Information (RTI) Working Groups

One critical component necessary for the ultimate success of making the right to information meaningful for women in Bangladesh is the establishment of a more conducive enabling environment. Effectively addressing any legal and social impediments to women's access to information requires a holistic approach that is targeted and that works at both the national and local level. To that end, the Center worked with the Cabinet Division, Information Commission and local government and civil society partners to foster a more amenable environment for women's access to information.

Initially, The Carter Center proposed the development of a national and district-level multi-stakeholder working group to help consider the issues facing women and propose solutions to overcome the legal and social challenges. However, a national RTI working group (RTI WG), led by the Cabinet Division and comprised of a number of government ministries, and district advisory committees already existed, but were not fully functional. Rather than duplicate existing bodies, the Center believed that it would be more efficient and sustainable to work on making effective the national RTI working group and district level committees in our target areas. The Cabinet Division invited the Center to present its ideas for the working groups, and how they might function to advance women's right of access to information.

In January 2018, and based on the Center's proposal, the Cabinet Division agreed to restructure the national and district RTI working groups. The new terms of reference for the working groups included developing a joint strategy and action plan to improve the enabling environment, organizing forums to engage key stakeholders, and helping to build their own expertise and develop awareness about women's right to information. To assure better coordination and implementation, The Carter Center suggested four tiers of RTI working groups: national, divisional, district and upazila. Convinced of its value, in May 2018, the Cabinet Division issued a Government Gazette on the revision of the working groups/committees on the right to information implementation and monitoring, with a special focus "to ensure women's right to information and activities at the



Circular issued by the Government of Bangladesh, reinvigorating the RTI Working Groups and including gender in their agenda.

Upazilla, District and Divisional levels.” Moreover, on recommendation of the Center, the working group expanded to include female elected members at all levels of the new working group with the expectation that this will improve the gender responsiveness of the group and give women a platform to participate in conversations where they may otherwise be excluded. For the first time, selected civil society organizations working on the right to information were invited to the working group meetings and additional ministries relevant to women’s access to information are called on to engage as observers.

“Empowering women is about more than just women’s issues...it is a social, societal and development issue...the benefits of women’s empowerment extend to all of Bangladesh. [When we say] that man’s outside work is glorious and important, and women’s work is unimportant...we are causing women’s subordination. If we empower women, we give them a process by which to establish control over materials, intellectual and ideological resources.”

– Research Officer, District Education Office, Sylhet

As a result of these reforms, the committees are now meeting more regularly, the Cabinet Division has made its commitment to women’s right of access to information clear to all local government officials, including encouraging more proactive disclosure of information, and gender responsive approaches and capacity building can be furthered.

Targeted Awareness Raising Campaigns

The 2015 study on women and access to information identified the perception that there are groups/individuals in Bangladesh that are more encouraging of women’s access to information and others that are less supportive. To raise awareness of the value of women’s access to information for the family and community, as a means of influencing those persons identified as obstacles, the Center worked with the Information Commission, RTI Working Groups, and school children in Khagrachari and Sylhet to come up with the elements of a targeted awareness raising campaign. For example, in coordination with the Information Commission, Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, and the RTI WGs of all four administrative levels in Sylhet, the Center held a half-day meeting for the RTI WG members in Sylhet, which included opening remarks from Chief Information

Commissioner Martuza Ahmed and a focus on developing messages and slogans for the targeted awareness raising campaign. Among the 43 total guests (31 men, 12 women), Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNO) from all 13 upazilas in Sylhet attended the event, contributing their slogan ideas and ensuring representation from across the district.



Female students pose with their poster designs in Sylhet.

In addition to the RTI WG members developing effective messaging, the Center worked with 50 students in Sylhet – from class seven to 10 – to design a visual

component for the targeted awareness raising campaign. Students from Poshim Sadar School were provided an overview of the right of access to information and asked to draw pictures expressing how they think youth and women might benefit from increased access to information. Of the 50 pictures submitted, the Center chose three, and paired them with slogans identified either by the students or the RTI WG.

These were transformed into poster designs, newspaper adverts, information for billboard displays and the basis for drama performances to motivate champions for women's access to information, such as young people, and to diminish the impacts of those less favorable. The Center received permission from both the Government of Bangladesh and the Information Commission to include their logos with USAID, The Carter Center and local partners. The Center's women and access to information program is considered the first in which the Commission and the Cabinet Division/Government have allowed their logos to be used, demonstrating a remarkable commitment to these efforts.

By The Numbers

- **Over 500** attendees at project inception meetings
- **110,000** posters printed for International Right to Know Day in 2017, 2018, distributed in **453** upazilas
- **6,000** targeted thematic posters printed to support women's access to information
- **1** TV spot produced by the Center and broadcast by the Ministry of Information

Finally, using these campaign materials, the Center hosted large events in various areas of Khagrachari and Sylhet to raise awareness of the right and offer ideas for how families can support their female members to exercise the right. These events included the use of street drama groups to present skits, encouraging community members to actively participate, and facilitated open discussions around women's right of access to information. Following the campaign launch, Shefali, a female class 10 student, indicated that she had not heard about the right to information before, and that the street drama skit showed her just how important it can be to her and her family. Others expressed their desire that the right to information be taught to all students in school, so that future generations will be more aware of the right and how to exercise it.

Celebration of International Right to Know Day

International Right to Know Day on September 28th provides an opportunity, each year, to highlight the value of access to information and to develop additional champions. The Center worked closely with the Information Commission and others to use the day to focus more specifically on women's right of access to information. For International Right to Know Day in 2017 and 2018, the Center worked with the Information Commission to design posters that supported women's access to information and fit within the Information Commissioner's theme for the day, and printed 110,000 posters over the two years, which were distributed in all 453 upazilas across Bangladesh. In 2018, the Center supported the creation of a TV spot, which told the story of a young woman using the right to information in her village to ensure that selected female elders were receiving the benefits to which they were entitled. Utilizing the materials beyond International Right to Know Day, the Information Commission has worked with the Ministry of Information and various TV channels to broadcast the TV spot across the country.

Overcharging Exam Registration Fees: A Dhaka Case Study by MRDI

Jhumur, a middle child to an older sister and younger brother, lives with her parents and siblings in Sanir Beel area inside Adabar. The Beel, which literally translates to marshland, is one among many low-income, densely populated neighborhoods in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka.

There is no clear accounting of how many people live in Sanir Beel, but Jhumur's family, and thousands like them, live in an environment riddled with mosquitos, where community toilets are unhygienic and often run without water, while stoves in common kitchens often are out of gas. The streets are dilapidated with the concrete missing. When it rains, water enters homes, while rickshaws and pedestrians on the street often fall into open manholes or trip over piles of garbage the city authorities have failed to remove.



Jhumur's father travels a far distance to work every morning. Despite his limited means, he has made sure that all of his children received an education. Jhumur's eldest sister graduated this year, while Jhumur is halfway through her own degree. To help pay for her own education, she teaches at a school. Two years ago, when Jhumur sat for the national board exam, her father had to take out a loan from a local micro-credit organization to pay the Tk. 8000 her school charged as an exam registration fee.

Prior to her sitting for the exam, Jhumur had discovered that the actual registration fee that the government charged was only Tk. 2300, while the rest of the money was going to her school. Her high school was enlisted in the monthly pay order system – meaning that the government paid the teacher salaries directly. What, she wondered, was the other Tk. 5700 for then? Even two years after she had completed the exam, the question still bothered her.

In December 2017, Jhumur attended a three-day training on the RTI Act led by MRDI. During the training, the girls identified by their community, who would become Changemakers, learned about their right to information, how to use the Act and file requests, what kind of information was publicly available, and what was legitimately withheld. On the final day of the training, the participants worked to develop their very first, of many, information requests. When asked to think of something they wanted to know, Jhumur's mind immediately went to the exorbitant registration fees her family had paid a few years back. She completed her request for information and sent it to the school's head teacher.

Initially, her request went unanswered. After a few months, Jhumur filed the same information request with the school's chairman. Again, it went unanswered. With the assistance of MRDI, Jhumur filed an appeal to the Information Commission for the requested information. Shortly thereafter, the head teacher reached out to Jhumur, asking her to withdraw her application, which he understood as a type of reprimand or investigation rather than a means of obtaining information. Nevertheless, he agreed to provide her the requested information. Later that week, the two sat down, and the head teacher showed her a list of school costs that the registration fees were meant to cover. Though Jhumur was not convinced that all the money was being properly accounted for, she has since noted that the school's registration fees for exam sitting have decreased, attributing this to her ability to hold officials accountable. "I realized from the training that people like us, from low income families, were being denied our rights," says Jhumur. "Not only were our rights being denied, they were being violated. I felt if we somehow managed to do something about it, then we might get them back. And through us, people would know about it, and then they could fight for their rights as well."

OBJECTIVE TWO:

Increasing national and target local governments' effective and equitable provision of information to women

Gender Sensitization and Awareness Raising

Across various activities, the Center and its partners worked with government officials and key civil servants to raise awareness of women's right to information in Bangladesh and improve their understanding of the unique obstacles that women face and its impact on women's access. Recognizing that

	Dhaka	Khagrachari	Sylhet
How familiar are you with gender roles, stereotypes and biases?	+14%	+71%	+28%
How familiar are you with the obstacles that women face in requesting information?	+13%	+44%	+36%
How familiar are you with the obstacles that women face in accessing proactively disclosed information?	+14%	+35%	+42%
How familiar are you with various ways in which information can be disseminated in a gender sensitive manner?	+13%	+59%	+44%

Pre and post survey results from gender sensitization demonstrated a significant increase in participant understanding of gender issues.

both the national and local level governments are integral to responding to women's information needs, the Center and our partners worked at both levels. In addition to working closely with the Cabinet Division to support activities in the field, the Center also conducted gender sensitization and awareness raising activities in Dhaka with high level members of those ministries identified as most relevant to women's information needs including the Ministry of Agriculture Education, Land, Primary and Mass Education, Women and Children's Affairs and others. In Khagrachari and Sylhet, the Center provided similar awareness-raising sessions for members of the RTI working groups, as well as day-long gender sensitization events for key civil servants, ensuring that they were better



Female participants complete an exercise during an event in Khagrachari to identify and highlight gender biases.

able to understand and focus on the gender specific pieces of their revised mandates.

Additionally, partners TUS in Khagrachari and IDEA in Sylhet led a series of awareness raising and gender sensitization focused activities with local government officials and communities. Working in conjunction with and designed to complement other program activities, such as courtyard meetings, TUS and IDEA were able to build and develop successful relationships with government officials, providing them

opportunities to learn more about the challenges facing women in their communities, effective means of responding to requests and the importance of proactively publishing and disseminating information in places accessible to women. Focusing on the local level in specific upazilas, TUS and IDEA were able to work with an extensive array of local government partners, many of whom participated in multiple events. Some of these activities included small meetings of various stakeholders at the union parishad and upazila level, where TUS and IDEA raised awareness of women's right to information and developed a feedback loop, sharing women's concerns, experiences and information needs directly with key government officials. In a separate set of activities, the program partners worked with Information Officers from the District level to hold community level information fairs, bringing together people to learn about the right of access to information, as well as government officials to answer questions and provide guidance on seeking and accessing information.

By The Numbers

- Over **1,400** civil servants trained on women's access to information
- Average **13%** increase in perceived professional capacity in Dhaka
- Average **64%** increase in perceived professional capacity in Khagrachari
- Average **33%** increase in perceived professional capacity in Sylhet

Efforts to raise awareness and sensitize officials to gender issues were strengthened by the support from the Cabinet Division and Information Commission, as well as the recognized and strong reputations of our civil society partners.

RTI Intensives and Capacity Development

In Dhaka, Khagrachari and Sylhet, the Center conducted a series of two-day RTI Intensive trainings for government officials from relevant line ministries. In total, more than 115 government officials and public servants participated in the multi-day trainings that focused on paper and digital records management practices, proactive disclosure requirements and exemptions, the state of women's access to information in Bangladesh, and ways in which ministries could be more gender sensitive in providing women information. Training topics were selected following consultations with the Information Commission and the Cabinet Division. Approximately 35% of the participants were female. In many instances, these women contributed unique insight into both the

	Dhaka	Khagrachari	Sylhet
How familiar are you with the contents of the RTI Act, 2009?	+12%	+56%	+28%
How familiar are you with common and best practices for records management?	+14%	+78%	+32%
How familiar are you with the types of information that the government is meant to proactively disclose?	+13%	+84%	+38%

Pre and post survey results from RTI Intensives demonstrated a significant increase in perceived participant capacity to do their jobs effectively.

challenges women face as well as potential ideas for more gender sensitive information flows. Facilitated by a mix of international and domestic experts, these trainings were participatory, engaging and challenged participants to think about how they individually and

professionally perceive the importance of women’s right of access to information. One-day refresher trainings were conducted in the months following the original two-day trainings, to ensure that participants recalled what they had learned, answer questions that had arisen since the initial training, and support the application of the training into their daily work. At the local level in Khagrachari and Sylhet, IDEA and TUS conducted capacity development work related to the right of access to information with members of union parishad bodies. These trainings included



Members of the Perachara Union Parishad pose with a program banner after participating in a capacity development event led by TUS.

overviews of the right to information, the RTI Act 2009, application procedures, appeal and complaint processes, and the role that gender often plays in accessing information. While the government participants often viewed the right of access to information

predominantly through the lens of their own ministry or organization, these local trainings provided an opportunity to demonstrate that the right is an overarching issue affecting everyone, and most particularly highlighting the potential to empower women across a wide variety of topics. Importantly, local government officials - such as one of the union parishad chairmen in Khagrachari, expressed his appreciation for the project, specifically indicating that there was an increased perception that local government representatives were more responsive to information requests and that the local community was more aware of their information rights.

Creative Mechanisms for Information Dissemination

The Center worked closely with the Information Commission and others to develop new or creative mechanisms to reach women with the right of access to information. In Khagrachari, TUS recognized that while women can enter government offices, it was not clear to whom she should be submitting her request for information. TUS worked with members of the local government to identify their Designated Information Officers and provided nameplates for each of them so that they are more easily identifiable by women entering government offices for information.

In Khagrachari and Sylhet, local governments worked with support from program partners to install billboards in prominent locations outside of government buildings and other centrally located areas to improve knowledge about the right to information, how to file requests, and what types of information are public. Moreover, they proactively posted information meaningful to their citizens. In total, 16 billboards were constructed across the program upazilas, with 10 in

Khagrachari and six in Sylhet.

Working with local partner Dnet, and in coordination with the Information Commission, the Center



supported the deployment of the Right to Information Online Tracking System (RTIOTS), a proprietary tool developed and implemented by Dnet that allows individuals to file information requests online and receive text and/or email responses as the information request is

Two women stop to read a billboard on the right of access to information in Sylhet.

processed, received and answered. The Center's 2015 study found that 69% of expert respondents indicated that fear of requesting information, a lack of time or mobility to reach offices and unequal treatment if they do get to government offices were important obstacles to women accessing information. With Dnet's online system, women can request information when it is most convenient to them, without the need to visit the agency or to confront the official. The Center and Dnet, along with key local government agencies in targeted areas, are piloting the online system to see whether it results in an increase in women's requests. While piloting in Sylhet remains ongoing, the Information Commission has expressed their interest in widening the use of the system across the country, embedding it in their offices and training relevant officials and civil servants on the system's use. Accordingly, the Center is excited to support a creative system that will support government dissemination and mitigate obstacles, thus allowing an increase in women's access to information.

“[It] is impossible to establish a developed country without women [having information and education] because women are more than half the population. If we want to [develop], women and everyone must know about and exercise their rights.”

- District Information Officer, Khagrachari

Seeking Better Quality Rice: A Khagrachari Case Study by TUS

Nishi lives in Mohalchora, Khagrachari with both her parents. As the eldest of 5 children – she has 3 younger sisters and a younger brother – her parents rely on her to help with the family in many ways. Nishi is studying history at the Khagrachari Government College, and though her dad is employed at a local hospital, she also tutors students privately to help cover tuition costs for her siblings.



Mohalchora is a village with limited resources and means of income generation; there is paddy land and some wild hills, but little else. Half of the population lives in economic hardship, and many families depend on gathering wild vegetables and firewood from remote hill areas, both for subsistence and to sell for a small income. Generally, households with more than two children struggle to pay school fees and other basic costs for children. Over the last several years, fluctuation in the amount and price of rice and other crops has varied widely, contributing to this economic instability.

With rising prices for seeds and other agricultural tools, the real benefit of rice and vegetable cultivation gets proportionately smaller. When there is not enough rain, crops suffer, and so do the families dependent on income generated by agricultural production, forcing them to take out higher interest loans to make ends meet. Seeing her neighbors struggle bothered Nishi. She knew that there were opportunities for grants and other forms of support for families provided by the government, but she did not know how to find out what these were or how people could apply for them. Nishi knew many people who were seeking to supplement their incomes or looking for training in new skills to contribute to income generating activities, but they, like her, were not sure how to find out what these opportunities were. When they would ask local authorities, they were told that it was difficult to obtain these grants, supports or training – that you would likely have to have connections to people in power to access them.

Nishi had always thought that using a law was solely for lawyers or judges. Identified for her role in the community and her pursuit of her education, she was invited by TUS to join a group of youth community leaders to learn about the RTI Act and how it could be used to improve her and her community's lives. She attended the training and was surprised and excited to learn that there was a way for her to use the law to get answers to the questions she had for so long wondered but had not been able to answer. Initially wary, she spoke about the process with her sister and a friend. As they discussed the matter and tried to identify what kind of information could have the biggest impact on their families and community, Nishi thought back to the challenges faced by so many when rice yields greatly fluctuated. After working with TUS to develop her request for information, Nishi submitted a request to the Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture on cultivation methods specific to her area's environmental challenges, as well as best types of seeds and their availability. What she found out was incredible.

In response to her request, Nishi learned that there was a specific strain of rice that grew better in her local area, and that there was information available about how to cultivate it effectively and minimize crop loss. She shared this information with several farmers she knew in the area, leading to higher crop yields, greater and more stable income, and improved production in her area. Feeling empowered, Nishi has continued to file information requests to address other issues in her community. Despite her success, it still takes courage to interact with government officials, "I am, deep in my heart, still afraid to visit the [government] offices, but each time I beat my fear to do my work" Nishi says.

OBJECTIVE THREE:

Civil Society Organizations and Information Liaisons Support Women's Use of the Right to Information

The greatest value of the right to information act rests in its use, as it is only through seeking and making requests for information that the benefits may be enjoyed fully. Increased awareness and understanding of the right of access to information is a prerequisite to action and was a large focus of the Center's programming, led by partners in all three districts. For example, prior to the Center's and partner TUS's program efforts in Khagrachari, there had never been an information request filed by a woman. With increased awareness, capacity and support, there have now been more than 100. Each of those requests information that has the potential to transform lives and communities.

Critical to the program's success was the engagement of respected and trusted civil society partners. By working with organizations known for their expertise and commitment, the focus on access to information for women received attention and confidence from the communities, which was integral to the projects achievements.

Repairing Local Infrastructure

Jannatul lives in Pirpur Village, Taker Bazar Union, Sylhet Sadar Upazila. Before attending a courtyard meeting led by IDEA, Jannatul did not feel confident leaving home or participating in public life. However, in November 2018, after learning about her right to information, Jannatul submitted a request for plans pertaining to the maintenance of a drainage system in her village. The current system was not functioning and had affected a dozen households in her community. Though she was nervous to ask for information, she immediately received a verbal response indicating that funds to fix the drain would be allocated in next year's budget. Unsatisfied, Jannatul filed another request and awaits information on the budget planning process to verify this commitment. She is committed to asking for information until the system is repaired.

Awareness Raising in Local Communities

Early in programming, TUS and IDEA developed groups of women recognized as leaders in their communities and invited them to participate in a series of recurring courtyard meetings focused on the right of access to information for women. These courtyard meetings, held in the community in locations easily accessible for women, followed a set structure: each meeting had a general topic for discussion, follow up discussion to previous meetings and identification of information interests for future meetings. Individual members volunteered, sometimes independently and sometimes together, to obtain the information through requests or seeking proactively disclosed information. For example, following a courtyard meeting in Sylhet, approximately 25 women visited their local government office seeking information about training opportunities. As a result, eight of the women signed up for a tailoring class led by the Department of Women Affairs. Moreover, another courtyard group decided to focus on the admission process into local primary schools. Ten women from the group visited their local union

parishad office to inquire about the registration process, ensuring their eligibility for school enrollment.



Local women participate in a courtyard meeting in Sylhet.

The information gathered by the courtyard women are used not only for their own individual advancement, but also shared with the group as well as others in their community. During the courtyard meetings, TUS and IDEA facilitators shared updates and feedback from their work with local government officials, acting as another form of information intermediary. In total, TUS and IDEA supported 400 courtyard meetings over the course of the program.

Additionally, program partners worked collectively to develop and print awareness raising materials for use throughout the program, while individual partners undertook developing a variety of unique mechanisms to raise awareness of women's right of access to information. In Khagrachari and Sylhet, TUS and IDEA worked with local government partners to develop and place information billboards outside of prominent government building locations. By conservative estimates, these billboards may have been viewed by more than 20,000 people based on the populations of areas they were placed and their prominent locations. MRDI and IDEA also worked to develop community radio programming related to women and the right of access to information, including drama skits, interviews, jingles, and PSAs that aired on multiple frequencies of Bangladesh Betar radio in Dhaka, Sylhet and beyond. MRDI's radio programming included a trivia component, which almost 4,400 people from across the country responded to through SMS, Facebook and email. Bangladesh Betar plans to continue running these radio programs in different locations throughout the country, ensuring their reach will be even greater than anticipated.

Correcting Electricity Bills

In 2018, the leader of the Thakurchara women's courtyard group in Golbari Union, Khagrachari Sadar Upazila received an unusually high electricity bill that did not correspond to actual usage. Having attended the courtyard meetings, she knew she had the right to go to the Water and Power Development Authority to file a request for information regarding the methods used to calculate bills and recourse options if bills were incorrect. After receiving this information, she was able to diagnose the issue and work with the Authority to correct her bill and prevent such from occurring again.

Capacity Development for CSOs

In addition to awareness raising events for wider groups of CSOs, program partners conducted capacity development trainings which were attended by approximately 75 organizations across the three program districts. Further, the three partner organizations conducted ongoing capacity development for a smaller subset of these CSOs that expressed interest and sought to more directly incorporate the right of access to information in their own activities, including developing greater capacity to create their own information disclosure policies and procedures. In total, MRDI, TUS and IDEA conducted ongoing capacity development trainings and provided technical assistance and guidance to 15 CSOs in the three districts.

In addition to the work of MRDI, TUS and IDEA, MJF conducted civil society Training of Trainer workshops and refreshers in each of the three districts. These trainings brought relevant domestic experts and officials to moderate sessions, including the Chief and other Information Commissioners, and to conduct intensive training over the course of these three-day events, including presentations, group project work and interactive brainstorming sessions to develop a theoretical understanding of the right to information and give participants the opportunity to put into practice their new knowledge and skills. Those receiving the training from MJF were charged with providing training and support to their organization members and others in the community.

Tottho Bondhus, Changemakers and Support Hotline

While increased awareness and capacity are critical, they may be insufficient to encouraging women to exercise their right to information. As Carter Center led programming in other countries on women's access to information showed, there may still be hesitation by women to exercise their right due to fear of potential repercussions, negative reception in government offices or low-levels of confidence amongst women who have never filed access to information requests. To assure that interested women were supported in seeking information, the Center employs a Tottho Bondhu ("Information Friend") in each of the three program districts. The Tottho Bondhus worked closely with MRDI, TUS and IDEA to assist women requesters, while also independently developing relationships within the local communities and government officials and serving as a resource and information liaison. The Tottho Bondhus, armed with a laptop and knowledge of the right of access to information does everything from helping identify the proper

By The Numbers

- **400** courtyard meetings held
- **Over 1,000** community leaders attended awareness raising events
- **Over 400** CSO leaders received training on the right to information, including Training of Trainers
- **95** CSOs and CBOs participated in program activities
- **Over 100** people assisted by the Information Assistance Hotline
- **Over 530** people reached through Changemaker Door-to-Door campaigns
- **Over 200** women assisted to access information by Tottho Bondhus and Changemakers
- **172,000** awareness raising materials printed and distributed

office to submit requests, assisting to complete an application, and accompanying women to the office so they were not going alone.

Before the Tottho Bondhus, there were very few information requests from women, particularly those living in the most rural or destitute areas. With the support of the “information friends” hundreds of women have been able to receive transformative information. In both Khagrachari and Sylhet, the increase in women requesting information has created a sense of enthusiasm beyond the individuals, encouraging others in the community and the local government officials. Whereas women used to struggle to employ the means of seeking



With the assistance of the Center's Tottho Bondhu, a woman in Sylhet submits a request for information.

information, the combination of the courtyard meetings and support of the Tottho Bondhus has resulted in more frequent and successful requests for information, which also is appreciated by local government ministries as critical information flows to women.



With guidance from the Center's Tottho Bondhu, a woman copies her notes from a courtyard meeting onto the request for information form.

In Dhaka, program implementing partner MRDI identified eight young women from two slum areas of the city and conducted an initial three-day capacity development training to empower them to serve as resources for women seeking information. Originally from the neighborhoods in which they focused, the Changemakers learned to file information requests and to use the right of access to information to address challenges their communities face daily. They also conducted ongoing door-to-door campaigns within their working areas, reaching hundreds of women with

information and offers of assistance for those interested in making access to information requests. MRDI served as mentors for the Changemakers, but all requests were derived from the women and their community needs and interests.

Finally, MRDI maintained an Information Assistance Hotline, staffed during regular working hours and reachable by anyone in Bangladesh. The hotline operators answered questions about information requests, processes for filing applications and appeals, and identified additional resources. The Assistance Hotline number was included in copies of awareness raising materials developed by the program and distributed throughout the working areas.

“We understand men should support their female family members to access information, but in reality, this is not happening yet. We need to do this both in our personal and our professional lives.”

– Head Teacher, Perachara High School, Panchari, Upazila, Khagrachari

Engaging Youth

During the program lifecycle, the positive role that young people can play in championing women’s right to information became clear. These youth, both men and women, can serve as information conduits contributing to a changed understanding of the right to information for women in the growing

generation and encouraging others to advance access. In 2019, MRDI, TUS and IDEA began activities working directly with youth and school management committees. TUS and IDEA worked with union parishad chairmen and members to identify young leaders between the ages of 16-30 in their local communities that had achieved at least a secondary education level. They created upazila level groups of 12-24 youth members who received intensive training on the right of access to information and how it can be used to further informed decision making and transform women’s lives and communities. These youth groups, which were largely female, became proficient requesters. In Khagrachari, for instance, members of these youth groups filed 65 information requests the same month that they had received training, showing that with sufficient awareness and capacity, there is a genuine interest and need for public information.

In addition to assisting these youth groups, TUS and IDEA worked directly with teachers and members of school management committees to develop their own capacity to use the right to information to help their students and students’ parents, as well as provide guidance on how the right to information can be better taught in schools. While RTI is included in regular curricula, a low level of awareness and understanding on the part of teachers often results in a cursory review or insufficient emphasis being placed on its power and importance in schools. With the local partners’ encouragement, teachers focused on ensuring that girls were aware of this right and felt comfortable exercising it, pledging to build their confidence and to “make them fearless.”

In Dhaka, MRDI held a large, multi-day “residential” RTI Boot Camp for 42 young women participants. Coming from Dhaka, Khagrachari and Sylhet, participants included university students and MRDI’s Changemakers. Over the course of three days, the training included 16 sessions of various formats, including games, debates, use of songs and theater, video viewing, group work, participatory discussion and lectures, to learn about, become familiar with, and gain practical experience using the RTI Act. Facilitators included MRDI staff and consultants, a communications specialist and a debate specialist.



RTI Boot Camp participants from the yellow team conduct group work as part of the three-day intensive training led by MRDI.

Groups were assigned to enable participants to share comparative experiences from their own lives as well as learn from each other throughout the course of the training. Following sessions on the theory behind the right to information, participants put their new knowledge into practice, completing sample information requests, identifying the proper information authority for them, and debating topics including the impact of information on good governance and citizen

awareness. Toward the end of the training, the groups created workplans for how they will use their right to information moving forward to empower themselves as well as their communities. MRDI continued to coordinate with the women to provide guidance, technical assistance, and direct support where necessary.

Finally, MRDI conducted awareness raising sessions in four schools, two each in Dhaka North and South, reaching a total of 465 female students. The awareness raising activities ensured that the students understood the right of access to information and culminated in a quiz competition with a small prize ceremony with the Chief Information Commissioner in attendance.



A poster drawn during RTI Boot Camp, demonstrating the power of access to information for women.

Obtaining Government Disability Allowances: A Sylhet Case Study by IDEA

Selima is a 28-year-old single mother in Toker Bazar Union, Sylhet. She is the mother of a seven-year-old child with cerebral palsy. Since her divorce, Selima has struggled to provide necessary medical care for her child, having to discontinue routine medical treatments at various points due to a lack of money. Though she lives with her father and works when she can as a housecleaner, she often does not bring in enough money to meet her family's needs. While the shared living arrangements help, she has the additional responsibility of helping to support her father. Selima says that figuring out how to provide better care for her child was a consistent stress in her life.



Selima had heard about government allowances for persons with disabilities but had never been able to identify the qualification requirements, the application process, or to whom she should make the request. Selima had reached out to members of her union parishad multiple times over the course of two years, but was either ignored or provided unhelpful information. She felt that she was being deprived of her rights and ignored by the authorities. Selima had lost hope of ever receiving any disability assistance for her son.

When IDEA began identifying women in the community to participate in regular courtyard meetings, Selima was invited to attend. She became a regular participant of the village courtyard meeting group and diligently attended monthly meetings to learn more about the right of access to information and how it can be used to transform lives. These meetings followed a set structure, that included an overview of the value of access to information and specifics of the law, as well as practical discussions about varying topics identified by the group. These topics rotated from meeting to meeting. After feeling defeated in her quest for the government disability allowance over the years, Selima decided to share her problem with the courtyard meeting group.

Upon hearing of her struggle to find information about disability allowances, the group decided to do something about it. Together, and using their knowledge about the right to information, they visited the upazila social welfare office and filed an information request on the requirements for obtaining disability allowances and the application process. The social welfare office gave Selima all the information she requested – finally an answer to the question she had been asking for so many years. Despite the application process being straightforward, it was opaque and inaccessible to Selima when she was not able to access the necessary information.

In October 2018, Selima completed the necessary paperwork and submitted her registration for disability allowance for her son. Her registration was approved in January 2019, and she received the physical disability card in February. She now receives a small quarterly stipend to support her son's medical care – making a vast difference in his, and her, quality of life. Now, Selima says “if women have information they can do anything...they will be able to change their lives.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Over the course of three years of programming, the Center and its partner have had to adapt to changing circumstances and incorporate iterative learning to ensure that our work was as impactful as possible. In the end, we have collected a series of lessons learned related to advancing women's right of access to information that are valuable for reflection and may serve to guide future programming Bangladesh.

Identifying and Highlighting Champions: Identifying champions and positively engaging them is critical to the advancement of the right of access to information, and particularly for women. Much of our program's success in providing capacity building and reaching more governmental officials is closely tied to our relationships with the Cabinet Division and Information Commission, and individual leading voices within each of these bodies. The Center has cultivated the partnership with the Cabinet Division and Information Commission for several years, and the trust and commitment that emerged from those relationships directly led to the successful implementation of our RTI Intensive activities, gender sensitization efforts and support for work with local government actors in Khagrachari and Sylhet.

Clear Commitment from Government Partners: Similarly, the program benefited from a clear and strong commitment to the right of access to information in Bangladesh. The work of the Information Commission and continuity of purpose across multiple Chief Information Commissioners during the project, as well as the Cabinet Division's willingness to specifically take up the issue of gender with respect to ongoing work on the right of access to information is reflective of the Bangladesh government's commitment to the transformational nature of information. Further, with a clear commitment to the right at the highest levels of government, program interruption and challenges presented by the transfer or turnover of government counterparts was minimal. This was the case even with an election during the middle of the programming cycle. Moreover, the positive signals provided by the leadership translated into a greater willingness to work with the Center and its partners at the local level. Finally, we note that when government is aware, it acts. When the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs learned of women's interest in skills development, they established training facilities closer to the communities, and more convenient for women to access.

Support for Local Government: For many women, the most relevant information is held by their local governments, rather than at the national level. In providing awareness-raising, capacity building, and gender sensitization for local government officials, we noted their enthusiasm for learning ways to better implement the right of access to information and to reach women and their willingness to put this new knowledge into practice. Service providers showed pride in their newfound abilities, and their relationship with women community members improved. The local governments efforts to more effectively respond to requests and to provide information to women was pivotal in advancing women's rights and in creating stronger links of trust with their constituencies.

Importance of Multiple Engagements: From our work to date, we have recognized the importance of repeating trainings, providing refresher interventions, and applying different learning methods and means for engagement to assure that the participants have more fully assimilated the information and can apply their new expertise. For example, as government officials, civil society groups and individuals in the community were largely unaware of the right to information prior to

our programming, their initial understanding is primarily from a hypothetical standpoint and not easily applied in practice. However, with continued engagement with the program, and opportunities to see how the right to information can be exercised to inform individuals and empower citizens, participants gained a more concrete understanding of its importance. This has been witnessed through courtyard meetings and our work with local government and youth.

Directly Supporting Women: We learned that when women learn about their right to information, they quickly identify their information needs. However, interacting with government officials, venturing into a more public arena, or asking for information has been a challenge for women across the programming. To this end, we learned that directly supporting women to understand their right to and request information is an important aspect of the Tottho Bondhus and Changemakers work. We also have seen that as women practice their right to information, they become more self-confident and comfortable in doing so.

Developing Agency and Voice: As expected, work on women's right to information does more than just provide data, it helps to develop greater agency and voice. This was a particular benefit for those women working on the project, including leaders of village courtyard meetings and information facilitators. Many of the Changemakers expressed that they have more confidence and they and the Tottho Bondhus are more respected by the local governments and their communities. They are prepared and eager to assume other leadership roles. Access to information is empowering for the requester, but we are reminded that it is equally empowering for those who are promoting the right.

Impact of Cultural Gender Norms: Programming over the last three years has reminded us of the extent to which gender norms are culturally embedded. Sessions focused on gender held across a variety of activities demonstrated that both women and men share the idea that women's role in society should be limited, often to the household. For many of the participants, these notions had never been questioned or explored. Notably, however, a great number of program participants – particularly the men – were eager to engage around the issue of gender, fully participating in all activities, asking questions, and even requesting additional gender sensitization. Nevertheless, there remained many – from local officials to community members and families – that continued to oppose women fully exercising their right to information.

Varying Challenges Impacting Women: Programming confirmed that while the obstacles identified by the 2015 mixed-methods study are commonly faced, they are at various levels of pronouncement in different areas, making the tailoring of program interventions all the more important. For example, in Sylhet, religious conservatism played a more significant role in diminishing support for women's access to information. In one area, women are not allowed outside of the home and were even fined when seen at the marketplace. To make a positive impact in that community, local partner IDEA involved the Divisional Government. After initial stages of struggle, women are now able to participate in courtyard meetings. For the Changemakers in Dhaka, there were a number of threats from the authorities as they feared the increase in transparency and accountability that access to information produces. MRDI took a number of measures to protect and support the young women requesters, including meeting outside of the slum areas where they were working and including the Information Commission and others, as necessary. In Khagrachari, the main obstacles facing women were geographical, issues with mobility and available time, and security. Recognition of these challenges informed TUS' interventions.

Diversity of Information Interest: Women are interested in a wide variety of information ranging from education and training opportunities to infrastructure and public benefits. Allowing the women to determine the information most valuable for them, their families and their communities assured that there was greater ownership in the requests and that the information would be applied for change. While focusing on a few thematic areas, such as education and land, might have had a greater systemic impact, it would have constrained women from exploring the diversity and abundance of available public information.

Importance of Engaging Youth: In the latter portion of our programming, we focused on involving young people in the three target districts. We noted the great enthusiasm that youth have for learning about and engaging around the right of access to information, and their immense creativity. Work led by our local partners has demonstrated that when youth are engaged, the benefits of the right to information extend beyond themselves and into their families and communities. Further, while the right to information exists within developed or established school curricula, there remain low levels of understanding. This deficit offers an opportunity to boost awareness and should be a clear emphasis for any future programming. The Center looks forward to continuing to develop these youth groups as effective conduits of information.

Information is Transformative: Our experience in Bangladesh further confirms what the Center has learned from similar programming in Guatemala and Liberia – that information is truly transformative and that it can be used to change lives. Not only were women enthusiastic to learn about their right, they were eager to exercise it. Further, we see that once women have the accurate information, they use it for the development of their family and community. They are eager to share what they have learned and support one another to file information requests. Perhaps most importantly, information has brought real changes to their lives and livelihoods.

More Work Remains: When working with government and in local communities in Dhaka, Khagrachari and Sylhet, the Center and our partners consistently heard a desire for this type of programming to be expanded to cover larger geographical areas, to incorporate additional government and civil society beneficiaries, and to delve deeper to enhance understanding and expertise. While awareness of the right to information in Bangladesh generally remains low, when better understood, it is quickly embraced as a powerful and transformative tool. There remains a great interest in and need for continued programming around this issue in Bangladesh, including further development of an enabling environment, a more capacitated supply side, and greater demand from citizens. Changing a culture of opacity and assuring that women have an equitable right of access to information takes time, persistence, and commitment. The Carter Center stands ready to help.

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