



## **Women and the Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh Recommendations for Action**

On May 30, 2016, the Carter Center and Manusher Jonno Foundation, with the support of the Information Commission, Bangladesh, organized a joint stakeholder meeting to consider the findings from the Women and Access to Information study in Bangladesh, discuss the key obstacles facing women, and generate creative solutions to address gender inequities in the exercise of the fundamental right of access to information. Over 40 government representatives, community leaders, and civil society champions working to advance transparency, accountability, freedom of information, and women's rights came together to consider the challenges and to develop recommendations.

In the meeting, following a brief presentation of the national and department-specific findings of the study on Women and the Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh, participants divided into working groups to consider the primary obstacles facing women in the exercise of the right, such as illiteracy, lack of awareness of the right to information or where to go and how to ask for information, cultural barriers, lack of time and mobility, and mindset. Each group was tasked with considering the various facets of the obstacles, developing creative, practical and achievable recommendations for overcoming the barriers, and identifying the stakeholder group (government, civil society, or joint) most appropriate for implementing the defined action.

The following represents the consensus agreement of the participants and supporting inputs from participants in district validation exercises on urgent action steps necessary to reduce inequities, mitigate obstacles, and advance the right of access to information for women in Bangladesh:

### Government and Information Commission

1. Encourage the Coordination and Reforms unit of the Cabinet Division to consider RTI policy guidance and reforms through a gender-sensitive lens and with particular focus on assuring an equitable right to information. Policy reforms might include assuring women-friendly environments for all public offices and specific times for women visitors, annual performance agreements to include specific activities for women's access to information, gender disaggregation of data, and sufficient budget allocations for RTI and women.
2. Increase awareness of the right of access to information and the gender asymmetries in flows of information. Awareness-raising could include:
  - a. Periodic circulars related to RTI, and women and access to information
  - b. Use of public media and creative RTI messaging
  - c. Expanded inclusion of RTI in school curriculum and textbooks
  - d. Presentations at union and local fairs
3. Provide additional specialized training for Designated Officers and Union Parishad representatives with focus on gender sensitivity, customer service, and support for illiterate

requesters, and include the topic of women and access to information in all general trainings related to RTI.

4. Establish and deepen mechanisms to assure that information more effectively reaches women, including but not limited to:
  - a. Further identifying specific information needs for women
  - b. Increased proactive publication and dissemination of the information most relevant to women:
    - i. Develop information that is most meaningful to women; and
    - ii. Disseminate information through multiple mediums, such as posters, billboards, leaflets, street theatre, village markets, community radio, SMS, and Television Placement of information in the community where women will have easiest access
  - c. Institute and support information centers at the union levels to be effective in providing information to women
  - d. Encourage capacity-building and expansion of government efforts to establish information ladies, such as Info Lady/Tottho Apa, and other similar door-to-door activities
  - e. Update websites and assure that information is current and accessible; and
  - f. Identifying alternative conduits for sharing information, such as teachers, local level government officers, local elite, and elected representatives particularly female representatives
5. Provide support for women requesters, including the expansion of existing Information Helplines to provide targeted and gender sensitive assistance to women.

#### Civil Society Organizations

1. Increase awareness about the right of access to information for women and the value of information for increasing economic empowerment and the promotion and protection of rights, including but not limited to:
  - a. Face to face meetings /courtyard meetings
  - b. Sensitization workshops/Group meetings
  - c. Popularizing the right to information through popular mediums, such as the use of cartoons, dramas, puppets, films etc.
  - d. Use of traditional media, social media, and community radio, for example “right to information day observation”
  - e. Campaigns and advocacy
  - f. Development of information and educational materials, including non-formal education, posters, wall paintings, street theatres, etc.
  - g. Student brigades, debate competitions, and/or school information councils
2. Expand the use of infomediaries to more effectively reach women with meaningful information. The infomediaries, which may at times be volunteers, can serve to help educate about access to information, support and guide women seeking information, and assist in dissemination of public information so that it reaches women, including through use of technology.

3. Provide training and capacity building for organizations working with women to enhance their ability to utilize the right of access to information and to support women in making requests for and seeking information.
4. Develop a stakeholder group of community organizations and leaders, marginalized groups, professional associations etc. to:
  - a. Build demand for women's access to information
  - b. Develop strategies for advancing women's rights to information
  - c. Advocate for policy changes, and
  - d. Monitor efforts to more effectively reach women with access to information and its impact

#### Joint

1. Establish multi-stakeholder committees to, among other things:
  - a. Coordinate efforts
  - b. Develop joint activities to advance the right of access to information for women
  - c. Share experiences and best practices
  - d. Cultivate incentives for increasing women's access to information, and
  - e. Monitor progress and conduct periodic reviews
2. Develop campaigns and mechanisms to engage a cross-section of society to change mindsets and to support women's access to information, such as opinion leaders, women's representatives including female UP/ward members, service providers, religious leaders such as Imams/priests, family members etc.
3. Integrate women and RTI into national celebrations such as RTI Day, Women's Day etc.
4. Jointly advocate for full and effective implementation of the RTI Act, which will serve to support all persons including women's access to information.

The participants of the meeting on women and the right of access to information committed themselves to promoting equitable access to information for all Bangladeshis. These recommendations serve as a roadmap of concrete and viable actions to further guarantee the right to information for the women of Bangladesh.

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May 30, 2016