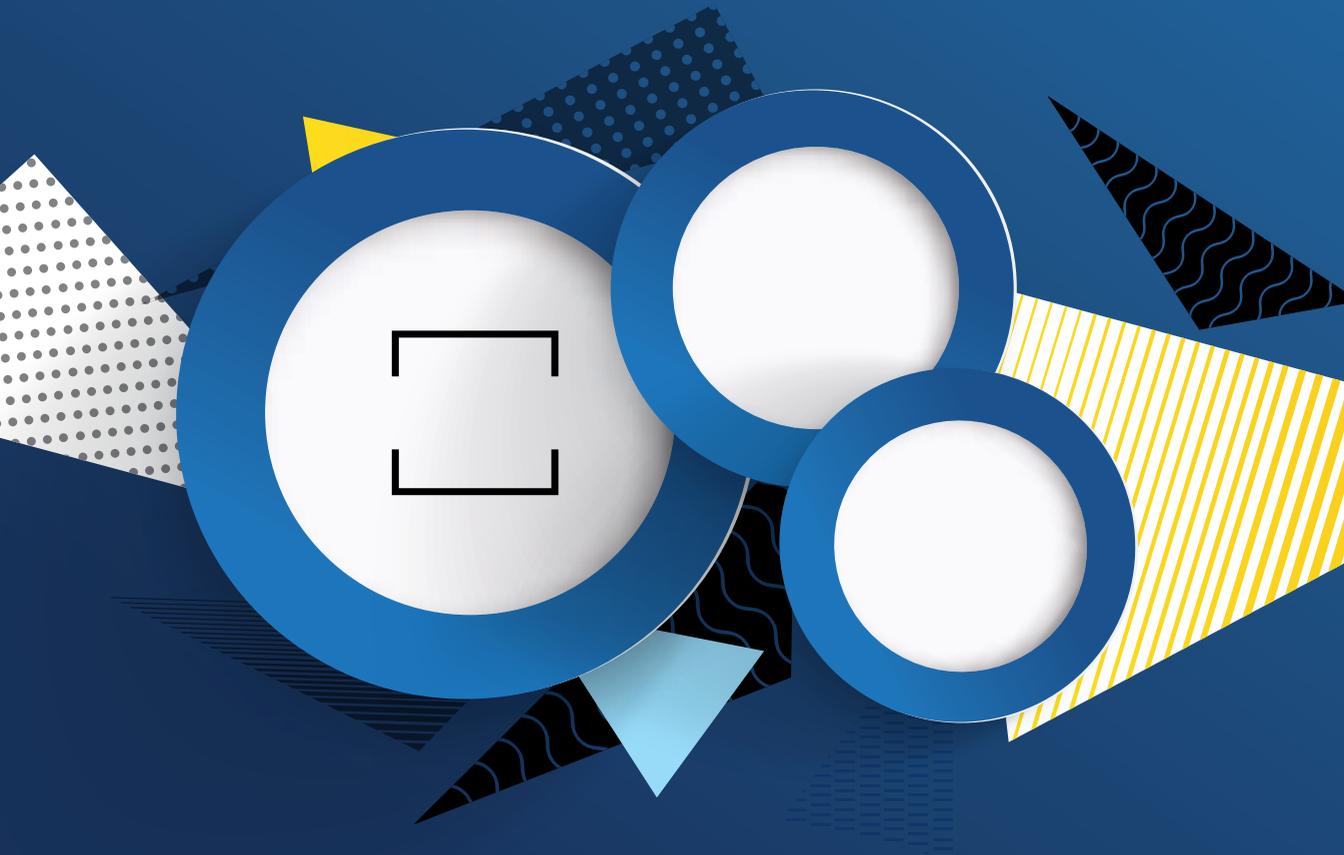


# A Journey by Rights Express

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**Mohammed Kamruzzaman**

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Insights and best practices on  
strengthening Human Rights  
Defenders in NETZ's YUKTA  
project in Bangladesh

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April 2025

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Published as part of the 'Young People at High School strengthen Women's Rights and Inclusive Governance in Bangladesh (YUKTA)' project of NETZ Partnership for Development and Justice jointly implemented by DASCOH Foundation and Manab Kallyan Parishad (MKP)

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## List of abbreviation

<b>CSOs</b>	Civil Society Organizations
<b>DNA</b>	Deoxyribonucleic Acid
<b>GESI</b>	Gender and Social Inclusion
<b>HRDs</b>	Human Rights Defenders
<b>IDI</b>	In-depth Interview
<b>KII</b>	Key Informant Interview
<b>MKP</b>	Manab Kallyan Parishad
<b>MoWCA</b>	Ministry of Women and Children Affairs
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SMC</b>	School Management Committee
<b>UNO</b>	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
<b>VAW</b>	Violence against Women
<b>YUKTA</b>	Young people at high schools strengthen women's rights and inclusive governance in Bangladesh





## Executive summary

NETZ Bangladesh is implementing a four and half-year (2021–June 2025) project titled “Young people at high schools strengthen women’s rights and inclusive governance in Bangladesh (YUKTA)” in eight districts of the northern region of Bangladesh. The overall objective of the project is to strengthen Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) to promote gender equality and inclusive governance along with protecting the rights of women and girls and preventing gender and identity-based violence in the working areas. The HRDs included both youth at high school and adults in community including teachers and School Management Committee (SMC) members of the selected schools.

A qualitative study was conducted to analyze the project interventions with a specific focus on the successful interventions of community-based CSOs and school-based Student Forum which were contributing to promote women’s rights and inclusive governance in the project areas. The primary data was collected in October 2024 in four districts—Rajshahi, Natore, Dinajpur and Rangpur. The study used Key Informant Interview (KII) and In-depth Interview (IDI) with a range of selected participants and groups. In addition, a document review was made to gather secondary information from different sources including project documents.

The study findings revealed that the YUKTA project was relevant in the local needs and contexts. The local people had a lack of awareness of their rights; they didn’t have enough information on accessing rights. Child marriage and violence against women were a common scenario in the areas. Further, addiction of drugs was an increasing problem, particularly for youth in the areas.

The project appropriately addressed the issues and concerns, and according to the study findings, it had four domains of actions: (i) formation of groups both at community and high school (ii) building awareness of the groups and others, broadly familiar as HRDs (iii) facilitate collective actions of the groups as well as HRDs through participation and inclusion in the state services delivery process and (iv) ensuring better services including prevention of rights.

The CSOs were the community-based collective of both women and men, (and youth for higher level), and it had four layers under a federal structure: (i) village CSO (ii) union CSO (iii) upazila (sub-district) CSO and (iv) district CSO. The village CSO was the primary unit or platform to work at village level. The Students’ Forum was the school-based collective of students—both girls and boys— of grades vi (six) to x (ten).

Building awareness and capacity of the HRDs (both at community and high school) was an important effort of the project. The CSO members and the students at schools were informed, oriented and trained to different issues related to child marriage; violence

against women and girls, gender equality; right to information; access to government services and entitlements; addiction of drugs etc. A unique self-defense training was offered to girl students; the school students were also trained and oriented on performing theatre and identifying unsafe areas through mapping the places of sexual harassment against girl students.

The students, as part of building their awareness took part in different activities which included: writing wall magazine; take part in quiz competition; organize knowledge fair; draw sexual harass map of school catchment area; participate in democratic dialogue in wider forum.

The study captured the perceived changes because of the awareness and actions of the collective. The findings explored changes at multiple level: individual, family, community and state level. At individual level, the CSO women were able to develop their leadership skills to mobilize collective actions; their social networks expanded; voices and bargaining capacity increased at public space and came to know about different services through right to information provision. The CSO members had better and increased knowledge also about the social problems and its mitigation process.

The activities of Students' Forum made the students capable to raise their voices; their fear and hesitation to speak publicly was reduced to a large extent and they were confident to make it further. The level of knowledge was increased for their participation in quiz competition. The girl and boy students developed a respectful relation to each other; they also became disciplined and more attentive to lessons; the female students had more attendance in school and they were confident to combat sexual harassment attempt due to their self-defense training. The perceptions and mindset of teachers also were changed; a better relationship developed between teachers and students, and they were more supportive to the students. The stigma associated with sexual harassment also reduced among the teachers.

At family level, mutual respect between husband and wife increased due to the CSO activities. The CSO women experienced a better and positive gender relation without any coercive behaviour of husband. The women's voice and choice also cared in family. The students felt encouragement to discuss about child marriage, violence issues with their parents and other relatives, and their preferences were valued.

The study respondents reported that the occurrence of child marriage and violence against women was decreasing in society; the sexual harassment also against girls became a less occurring phenomenon due to the collective resistance. The acceptance and reputation of CSOs was increased in community and the local people identified the CSOs as an opportunity to seek justice and they, in many respects, sought help of CSOs for a dispute or issue.

The collective efforts of HRDs made them capable for better connection and access to various government departments. It consequently helped them to receive better services in need. They were able to bargain for issuing social safety net cards such as maternity voucher for families who needed it. They organized democratic dialogue with various state institutions and it helped them building social networks as well as accessing state services as part of their rights.

The study identified a range of best practices in the project activities. These were: addressing contextual needs in project design and implementation; gender parity in Students' Forum; gender equality and men engagement in CSOs; participatory process for awareness and capacity building; engaging youth into collective actions; inclusion of marginal into collective actions; provision of federal CSO structure and process; inter-generational linkage through adults and youth; democratic values into the actions; bridging demand and supply side stakeholders.

The interventions of YUKTA project worked well and it further created a demand to seek social justice by the community people for improving their lives. The adult HRDs of CSOs at community and the young HRDs at schools were the catalyst of changes to stop child marriage, violence against women; sexual harassment against girls; and addressing other emergency issues like addiction of drugs. The HRDs were also in a better position to make the duty bearers accountable for delivering services in equitable manner to the citizens. The interventions encountered some challenges also. In order to make an increasing impact of the project, the study recommends some issues for reconsidering in future interventions: (i) increase coverage of high schools in a same geographical area to strengthen the rights movement (ii) increase number of workshop, meeting, training for a regular flow of motivation and influence (iii) engage guardians, especially who have girl child, to ensure awareness as well as track and monitor child marriage at risk (iv) make SMC members more active and involve upazila administration if needed (v) increase network and advocacy with upazila administration including police for safety and security in the work of combating sexual harassment and drugs use (vi) keep provision of financial incentive for the extremely poor people, and (vi) increase media campaign at national level for advocating and influencing high officials of the government.





# 1. Background

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The World Report 2024 of Human Rights Watch drew attention to violence against women (VAW) including sexual violence and rape, and child marriage situations of Bangladesh. It discussed about women's challenge in seeking protection or services or access justice; also, about child marriage which was one of highest rates (51%) in the world. According to the report, women and girls faced widespread sexual violence with little option for protection.<sup>[1]</sup>

Not the international organizations only but also the Government of Bangladesh acknowledged the high prevalence of VAW in the country. According to the last national survey report, about two thirds (72.6%) of ever married women experienced forms of violence by their husband at least once in their lifetime.<sup>[2]</sup>

Due to magnitude of the problem, the government has already introduced number of policy and legal frameworks to address VAW as well as advance gender equality and women's empowerment. These include, for examples: National Women Development Policy 2011; National Psycho-social Counseling Policy 2016; National Children Policy 2011; Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain (Women and Children Repression Prevention Act) 2000 (amended in 2003; Protirode and Surakha Act 2010; Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection Rules) 2013; Child Marriage Restrain Act 2017; Child Marriage Restrain Rules 2018; Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) Act 2014; DNA Rules 2018; Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 (amended in 2018); Digital Security Act 2018.<sup>[3-14]</sup>

In line with the legal and policy frameworks, there were numerous government and non-governmental programme and project interventions to address VAW in the country. The "Multi-sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women" was a national initiative of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) in partnership with Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Youth and Sports and Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperative. [15] Apart from the MoWCA led programme, the government and NGOs in Bangladesh were implementing many projects to combat VAW.<sup>[16]</sup>

Such projects, in many respects, covered both 'prevention' and 'protection' approaches and there were plenty of evaluation studies which explored a range of positive results e.g. increased level of awareness, increased access to services because of such initiatives.<sup>[17]</sup>

The programmes and projects on VAW faced various challenges and weakness that limited effectiveness of the initiatives. A government led evaluation identified that lack of coordination among authorities, less motivation of duty bearers including law enforcing agencies, lack of promptness and cooperation from local influential, lack of required funding were critical challenges for VAW programme management.<sup>[17]</sup> Jewkes et. al. Argued that context was important to address VAW and not every intervention worked in every setting.



They emphasized on understanding variations across contexts even within a country and suggested to be cautious for scaling up. Reporting on VAW also was a challenge because of social stigma among people. [18] Khan in case of Bangladesh argued that there was a problem with accurate reporting of domestic violence because it was too often considered as just a normal part of gender relations. He identified domestic violence as a complicated and difficult issue to study saying that the research findings on VAW were inconsistent.<sup>[19]</sup>

VAW is a critical area of gender equality and women's empowerment which been an essential issue in development practices worldwide and it is considered as one of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in global development process. [20-21] Gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) has been a popular tool in development literature due to gendered nature of vulnerability and exclusion, in most cases for women. [22] Many development organizations, particularly in the global south, have efforts to address gender inequality through increasing women's inclusion and participation at different levels, from households to state, and facilitating their active voice and agency for greater empowerment. Such efforts also became a part of ensuring inclusive governance and just society from human rights perspective.<sup>[23]</sup>

## NETZ Bangladesh for promoting gender equality, women's empowerment and inclusive governance in Bangladesh

NETZ Bangladesh is implementing a project titled "Young people at high schools strengthen women's rights and inclusive governance in Bangladesh (YUKTA)" in some selected upazilas (sub-districts) of eight districts in the northern region of Bangladesh. NETZ Bangladesh is partnered with other two organizations, Manab Kallyan Parishad (MKP) and DASCOD Foundation, to implement the project from 01 February 2021 to 31 December 2024 with further no cost extension up to June 2025. The overall objective of the project is to strengthen Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) to promote gender equality and inclusive governance along with protecting the rights of women and girls and preventing gender and identity-based violence in the working areas.

The expected results are: (i) 4,000 young and 11,880 adult HRDs are strengthened to promote gender equality and inclusive governance in 8 districts and at the national level in Bangladesh (ii) young HRDs at 80 high schools are recognized as important civil society actors for the protection of women's and girls' rights and the prevention of violence; in dialogue with government agencies they make young people's perspectives on inclusive governance visible from local to national level and (iii) adult HRDs, organized in 424 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) from local to national level, are recognized as important civil society actors for the promotion of gender equality and inclusive governance and cooperate closely with government agencies to this end.

The organization intends to document the project's best practices and lesson learned by assessing the changes it has brought as a result of the project intervention. The outcome of the documentation will also serve as knowledge product to be shared across a wider audience and will be used as advocacy tool for policy inputs to promote women's rights and inclusive governance in Bangladesh. Within the context, this study aimed at capturing successful interventions of CSOs and Students' Forum of YUKTA project of NETZ Bangladesh.

## 2. Objectives of the assignment

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The overall objective of the assignment was to analyse the case stories and find out the best practices that portray the successful interventions of CSOs and Students' Forum which were contributing to promote women's rights and inclusive governance in Bangladesh.

### 2.1 Specific objectives

The specific objectives were:

- (i) To document the best practices and lessons learned during the project implementation cycle in the form of narrative and case stories for showcasing to a wide spectrum of audience, and
- (ii) To capture and document case stories showcasing changes and impacts brought out by the project interventions.

## 3. Study design, methodology and selection of participants

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The assignment was carried out in a form of research, and qualitative method was deployed for primary data collection in the field sites. In addition, a document review was made to gather secondary information from different sources including project documents.

For primary data collection, the study used Key Informant Interview (KII) and In-depth Interview (IDI) with a range of selected participants and groups.

The KIIs were conducted with the relevant officials of NETZ Bangladesh, the partnering NGOs and the non-student adult HRDs such as teachers.

The participants for IDIs included CSO members and students who played a very significant role to achieve the project objectives.

In all cases, gender and social inclusion (GESI) approach was considered to understand a GESI perspective of the learning and best practices.

All the participants were selected purposely to reflect the best and successful cases in the project and a total of 9 KIIs (Female: 4) and 19 IDIs (Female: 12) were conducted.



### 3.1 Primary data collection procedure

All the interviews were conducted face to face and in the place the participants preferred. The interviews were conducted as per the convenient time of the participants. An appointment was made to set date and time for interviews. NETZ Bangladesh provided necessary supports for availability of the participants. An interview guide was used to collect the data.

### 3.2 Study areas

The primary data was collected in four districts which were Rajshahi, Natore, Dinajpur and Rangpur (figure 1). The fieldwork was conducted in the month of October in 2024. The following table (table 1) is about the districts and number of samples by KII and IDI.

**Table 1:** Sampled study areas and participants

Sl. No.	District	Nos of KII	Nos of IDI	Total
1	Rajshahi	03 (F: 01)	05 (F: 03)	08
2	Natore	02 (F: 02)	05 (F: 03)	07
3	Dinajpur	02 (F: 0)	05 (F: 03)	07
4	Rangpur	02 (F: 01)	04 (F: 03)	06
	Total	09 (F: 04)	19 (F: 12)	28

### 3.3 Data analysis

A thematic analysis was applied in this research to explore the objectives mentioned before. In order to conduct the thematic analysis, the interview data was grouped to codes and themes for developing the narratives.

## 4. Ethical issue

There are number of ethical issues which was considered in this assignment on privacy, confidentiality and safety of the respondents. Participation in the study for an interview was completely voluntary and they were not forced to take part in the interview. In addition, they had a choice to skip interview at any point. The interviews were taken in their preferred time and the process ensured that it didn't produce any harm for any of the respondents. At the beginning of the interviews, they were informed verbally about the interview objectives including its nature. All interviews were conducted face to face and oral consent were taken if they agree to participate. A written consent was taken to use their photograph in the report. The interviews were recorded in digital recorder/ mobile phone and they were informed as well about the recording of interview. The respondents were informed further that all data and information of this work will not be disclosed to any third party who is not a part of the study. Further, they were informed that there will be no direct benefits to them. However, the study findings will be shared with the wider audience to inform best practices of the project. In this case, the data will be anonymous, if NETZ Bangladesh authority agrees.



## 5. Findings

This section presents the findings of case stories' analysis which were captured in different YUKTA project areas of NETZ Bangladesh. It focuses on contextualizing the project needs as well as objectives in the study areas; the project approach to gender equality and inclusive governance and the perceived changes due to the project interventions.

### 5.1 Contextualizing project objectives and targeted outcomes in the study areas

According to the study respondents, the YUKTA project was relevant to their working areas because of local needs and contexts. As the figure 1 illustrates, the local people there had a lack of awareness of their rights; they didn't have enough information on accessing rights. Child marriage and violence against women were a common scenario in the areas. A large part of people were poor which reinforced child marriage and violence against women and girls. Further, addiction of drugs was an increasing problem, particularly for youth in the areas.

An official of a partnering NGO in Rajshahi said,

“ We work in four districts and the problems are more or less same in each of the districts. We basically work on human rights; child marriage, violence against women are inbuilt in our human rights work. Women in the areas were used to family violence regularly; women even did not know that violence is a crime. They thought it is a normal thing ... husband can beat a woman, if he wants. This was the perception before we had started our work. ”

[KII, Rajshahi]

Another official of the partnering NGO described,

“ We work in remote areas and the government services were weak there. The people had a lack of awareness; they didn't know about government services; they perceived that the government services and benefits were donation for them, not their rights. ”

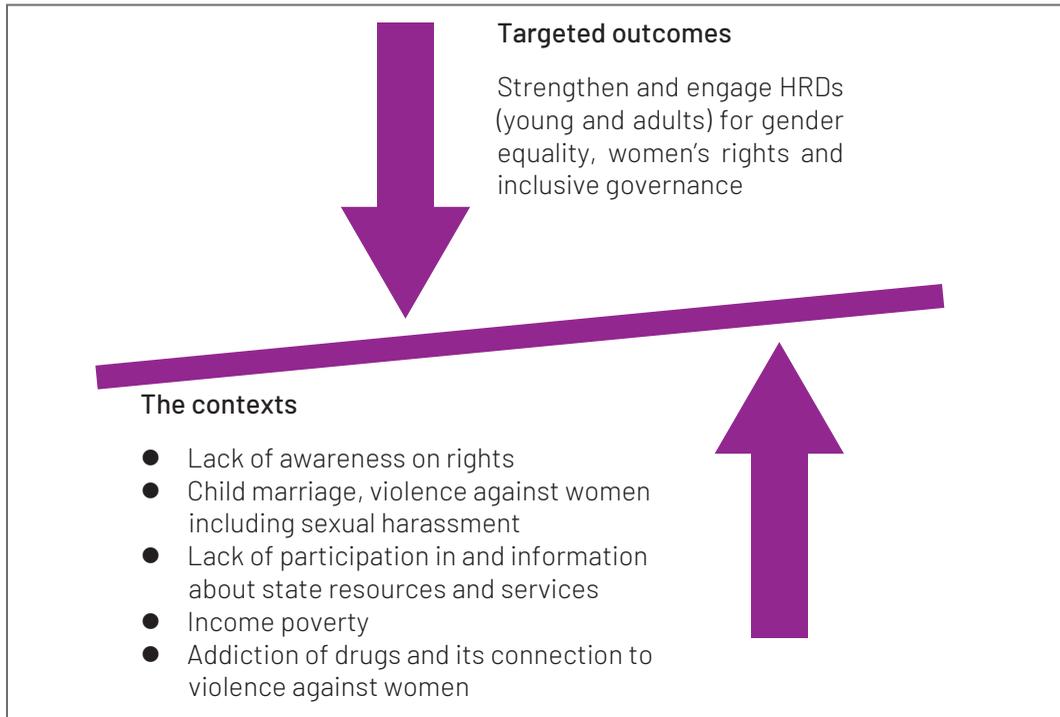
[KII, Natore]

The same reflection was captured in other districts also. An official of a partnering NGO in Dinajpur described how they made a focus on local problems.

“ If you compare our area with Chottagram or Khulna or Sylhet, you can see that the infrastructural development is poor in this area. Not the infrastructure only, there are many issues you can compare. This area has high level of poverty; the people have low level of awareness on social issues; they have lack of access to institutional services. ”

[KII, Dinajpur]

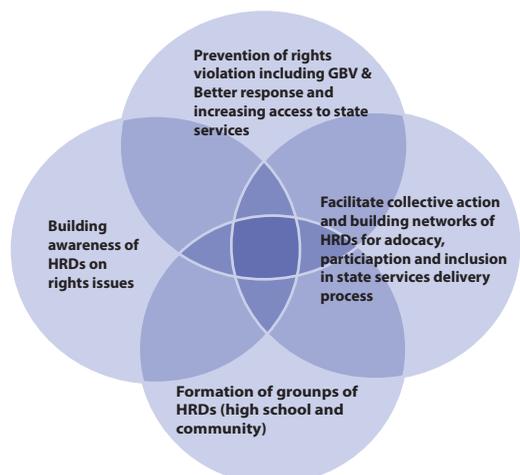
Not the officials of partnering NGOs only but also the Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) such as teachers and students reflected the same.



**Figure 2:** Contextualizing project objectives and targeted outcomes in the study areas

## 5.2 The project approach to gender equality and inclusive governance

The YUKTA project applied an “awareness to action” approach to promote gender equality and inclusive governance in its working areas. As the figure 2 shows, it had four domains of actions which were: (i) formation of groups both at community and high school (ii) building awareness of the groups and others, broadly familiar as HRDs (iii) facilitate collective actions (including building networks for advocacy) of the groups as well as HRDs through participation and inclusion in the state services delivery process and (iv) ensuring better services including prevention of rights.



**Figure 3:** YUKTA approach to promote gender equality and inclusive governance in the study areas

### 5.2.1 Formation of groups in high schools and communities

YUKTA enabled its beneficiaries to form groups both at community and high schools. At community it was familiar as “Nagorik Samaj Songoton” in Bangla or “CSO” in short in English. The group at school was named “Students’ Forum”, shortly known as “Forum”.

#### Formation of CSO at community

The CSOs were the community based collective of the project and it had four layers under a federal structure: (i) village CSO (ii) union CSO (iii) upazila CSO and (iv) district CSO. The village CSO was the primary unit or platform to work at village level. It consisted of 25 members, 13 women and 12 men. The village people, who were interested and committed to protect human rights, were prioritized for the membership of the CSO. The entire process of selecting members was participatory—through discussion with the people to make a decision.

*A total of 424 CSOs were formed in which 5686 females and 5320 males actively engaged and worked as HRDs to protect and promote human rights in the project areas.*

#### Box 1: Diversity in CSO membership

*The CSOs were diverse in terms of its membership. It included women, men, representatives of youth; religious and ethnic minorities where relevant. The CSOs at higher level also included non-poor influential people to influence the duty bearers in delivering their services. Therefore, it was not an organization of homogeneous groups of people. It was inclusive in line with the “inclusive governance”, the project worked for.*

An official of a partnering NGO said,

“ If we take women only, then it could be a very conventional approach. People would say, w work for women only. But this is not true. We work for all. You know we work for violence issue also. If we did not include men, preventing violence would be very difficult. We have men also in our CSOs. So, they [the men] have scope to know about it. They have responsibility to reduce violence against women. They all are human rights defenders. Men are sohojodhay [co-fighters] for our actions. ”

[KII, Natore]

## Formation of Students' Forum at high school

Engaging youth was an important initiative of the YUKTA project in its working areas. The project targeted high school students and formed Students' Forum considering the students of classes VII, IX and X. Both girl and boy students were taken in the forum from a 50:50 approach (15 girls and 15 boys) in the forum composition.



Image 1: Monthly meeting of Students' Forum

*A total of 80 Students' Forum were formed in which 1200 girls and the same number of boys were actively engaged to perform different activities further to protect and promote human rights in the project areas.*

As same to the community level CSOs, for the Students' Forum also, a sense of diversity was prioritized such as taking students from minority or excluded groups. The Students' Forum was a vibrant platform to implement the project's school level activities in the study areas.

### 5.2.2 Building awareness of HRDs on human rights issue

Building awareness and capacity of the HRDs (both at community and school) was an important effort of the project in order to promoting gender equality and inclusive governance in the study areas. The CSO members and the students at schools were informed and oriented to different issues related to child marriage; violence against women, gender equality; rights to information; access to services; addiction of drugs etc.

#### Building awareness of CSO at community

The village CSOs held meeting in every month and discussed about various issues affecting their lives. The findings revealed that they mostly discussed about child marriage; violence against women; dowry, rights to information on government services. The group identified drugs also as emergency issue which was further connected to child marriage; violence against women, dowry and sexual harassment against girls.



Image 2: A training session for CSO members

A CSO leader described,

“ We organize meeting regularly. We discuss about child marriage; family level violence; gender equality issue; rights to information; human rights. We discuss so that people can know about the issues; they can be aware about the issues. ”

[IDI, Natore]

*According to an official of a partnering NGO, the CSO members organized the training by themselves; they selected the participants and venues; the NGO just facilitated the efforts of the CSOs.*

A total of 1720 CSO members were capacitated through different issue based training related to human rights. Among them, 1308 (females: 708) were Muslims and 342 (females: 218) were Hindus from Bangalee community while another 70 (females: 46) were from adibashi community who belonged to low caste Hindus.

Another official of a partnering NGO said,

“ They [the CSOs] do need assessment at the beginning of a year and prioritized through voting. The issues may be drugs; violence against women; road condition or any other things they feel important and then finalize an issue for collective action. They connect the issues together. They do not take all the issues, they finalize based on voting. They work based on a plan. They fix who will do what, who will approach whom to get a solution. ”

[KII, Natore]

### Box 2: Men engagement in CSO and couple meeting

*Men engagement is an important issue in the CSO meeting. Each village CSO had 12 men to work with 13 women in the group. Both women and men members organized the meeting collectively; they discussed through a democratic practice to take a decision. The men were not domination in the meeting. Each of the members had equal value and they respected each other in making a decision. There was a couple meeting also where both husband and wife joined and discussed an issue in a participatory and democratic manner.*

## Building awareness of students at high school

Building awareness and capacity of students at schools was an importation effort to strengthen HRDs in the project. The students received two types of formal training in the project: (I) self-defense training for girls and (ii) training on performing theatre. Further, they were oriented to the issues of gender, gender discrimination; child marriage; violence against women; sexual harassment against girls.



Image 3: A Training session for Students' Forum

The self-defense training was offered to 20 girl students in a school and they trained other girl students also in the school. In addition, they carried out a range of activities which helped them developing their level of awareness and capacity. The activities included: writing wall magazine; take part in quiz competition; organize knowledge fair; draw sexual harass map of school catchment area; participate in songlaap [democratic dialogue] in wider forum. The project delivered a set of books to each of the schools for the students, and review and discussion of the selected books was an important part of developing their level of knowledge.



Image 4: Self Defense training for girl students at schools

Case story: | 01  
 Titas: A school boy aspires for violence and child marriage free society in future

Titas Chandra Roy was aged 13 only but knew about bad consequences of child marriage because of his membership in Students' Forum in his school. Such knowledge and awareness encouraged him to take part in Forum's action against a child marriage in his village. He said, "There was a preparation of child marriage in our village. Sajib bhai got the news first. He shared it in the forum. Then we decided to stop it. We, all the forum members, went to the house; met and talked to the parents. They were desperate. But we told them about health risks of child marriage of their girl. We also informed him about punishment in laws. Then they understood it and decided not to marry off their daughter now."

Being a member of Students' Forum in his school, Titas attended monthly meeting where they discussed about different issues—child marriage; violence against women, women's rights, human rights etc. The discussions helped him learning about the issues; also developing his confidence. "I was shy in nature; I was not used to talk or speak in front of others. Now that shyness has reduced; I speak in the meeting; I can also speak in gathering without any fear", he stated. "Now I can also attentive to my lessons", he added.

Titas took part in organizing knowledge fair in his school. Manob Kollayn Parishad gave some books to his school. Titas and other students were able to know many things from reading the books. He also discussed about his learning in the knowledge fair.

Titas was excited to tell about his participation in organizing theatre on child marriage. He felt that the theatre was very helpful to deliver messages to the people.

Titas was reading in Class VIII and he hoped that he will get more opportunities in future to carry out such activities by Students' Forum. He came to know about many incidents of violence against women in his village; he thought that a woman, once married off, faced pressure to pay dowry to her husband, and it's one of reasons for violence. He felt sad when a husband tortured his wife for dowry and he desired to stop it forever. He wished to work more in his future life; also, asked to take more schools in Badarganj for massive awareness of the people.

A teacher, involved in the project, said,

“ We have different activities for the students. We orient them on gender and rights issue. They receive training on self-defense and theatre; participate in writing wall magazine; knowledge fair. They draw harass map to ensure safety of the girl students. They also organize and participate in quiz competition which is very important for their general knowledge. ”

[KII, Rajshahi]



**Box 3: “Napkin Corner” at high school**

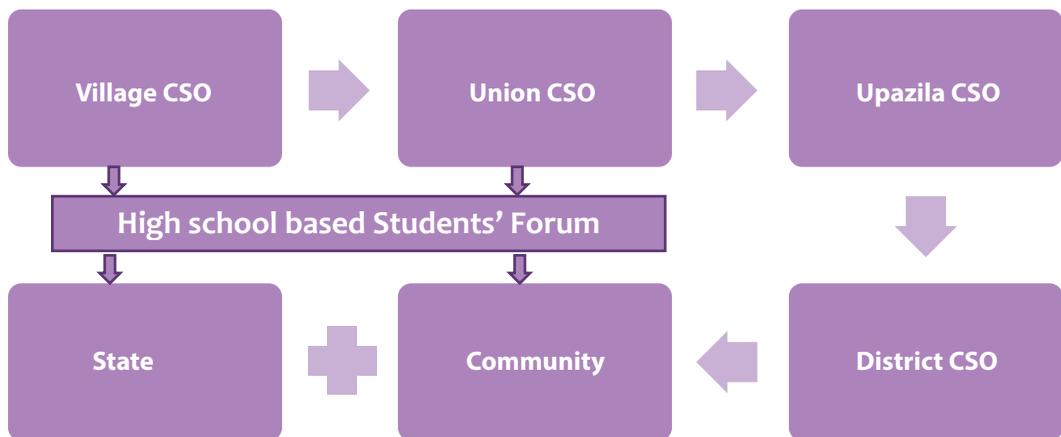
*To ensure health and hygiene practices in schools, the project had a provision of napkin corner targeting the girl students in need. Some of the schools had a support to girl students before but it was informal in nature, keeping pads with a female teacher and give it to a student in emergency situation. The YUKTA project had an effort to strengthen the practices through a dedicated corner with giving responsibility to a female teacher. The costs of pads and other necessary items were supported by girl students only in a contributory and voluntarily process.*

**5.2.3 Facilitate collective action of HRDs for participation and inclusion in state services delivery**

Undertaking collective actions by the HRDs, both at community and school, was an essential process to promote gender equality and inclusive governance further to preventing violence against women and girls; protecting rights and accessing the state services for the people in need.

**Collective action of CSOs**

The collective actions of CSOs targeted the issues and problems both at community and the state machinery, subject to nature of problems and type of CSOs. The village CSO usually dealt with the issues at local level such as child marriage occurrence in the village; violence against women in a family, addiction of drugs of a local person etc. The village CSOs; as the figure 3 shows, however, had a federal connection to other higher level CSOs—union, upazila and district, and the school based Students’ Forum, and they all had joint initiative, for example, organizing democratic dialogue at union, upazila and district level. All the actions of CSOs were based on a year plan they discussed and made before.



**Figure 4:** Collective action of CSOs at different levels and Students’ Forum for inclusive governance in community and state

An official of a partnering NGO described,

“ We facilitate building networks of the CSOs with various government departments. They have networks with union parishad and participate in the parishad’s budget session for decision making. We help them to be member of committee in union parishad. They have linkage with jobo office [Department of Youth], mohila office [Department of Women Affairs], krishi office [Department of Agricultural Extension] somaj seba office [Department of Social Services], motso office [Department of Fisheries], pasho office [Department of Livestock]. They organize quarterly songlaap [dialogue] with different offices and want to know about the services under RTI. ”

[KII, Natore]



Image 5: A meeting of village CSO

#### Box 4: CSOs’ negotiation with service providers

*The CSO members had opportunities to negotiate with the service providers, from union to district level. Because of their platform, they were familiar faces to various offices and departments. When they approached to a department for a service or issue, getting the service was fast and easier.*



Image 6: A meeting of upazila CSO

Case story: | 02  
 Hazera Begum: From a housewife to a social leader  
 for accessing state services for poor and marginal

Hazera Begum led a typical village life in her earlier age, even before engaging with the YUKTA project in 2021. Hazera lives in Fotengapara village of Boro Horishpur union of Natore, a district to the western region in Bangladesh.

When the officials of DASCOPH Foundation met and talked to her about forming a group in her village, she did not disagree, rather she took it as an opportunity to change the society and people in her area. Hazera, in her earlier life, was studying in Class IX but she could not continue her education as her parents decided to marry off her. One day, her parents informed her about the decision but she had nothing to do as this was the social practice. Consequently, she got married and according to her it was a child marriage. Now she is 42 with her husband and two sons and two daughters in law in her family.

Not Hazera herself only but also her elder son was married off when he was 17 years only. He married eight years ago. Hazera had examples of child marriage in her family and she understood that it was not good for a girl or boy as it hampers education; also creates health risks for a girl if she becomes pregnant. Hazera was experienced of occurring child marriage in her area also and she thought that it was a social problem, not her problem only.

When the officials of DASCOPH Foundation informed her that they would work for women's rights and governance, and they would work on child marriage, violence against women, dowry etc., Hazera identified that this was her agenda too. The time was 2021. Without any delay, she agreed and started her efforts. She organized a meeting with some of village people to discuss further and mobilize them into formation of a group. This was the initial stage of forming "Fotengarapara Sushil Somaj Songthon", a village based civil society organization (CSO) facilitated by DASCOPH Foundation.

There were many people encouraged and interested to join the CSO. But it was restricted to 13 women and 12 men only. They discussed further and prioritized to the people who had enough and dedicated time for the group. A consensus was made and at last they formed the group and named Fotengarapara Sushil Somaj Songthon. Hazera was made President of the group.

Initially the group was informed about the issues but they did not know about process—how would they do their work. DASCOPH Foundation facilitated series of training and awareness sessions for them. They met regularly in every month to discuss about various issues and problems and to find a solution. They were oriented about different human rights issues including child marriage; violence against women; dowry, rights to information on government services. The group identified drugs also as emergency issue which was further connected to child marriage; violence against women, dowry and sexual harassment against girls.

Day by day, because of the training and orientation, the group members came to know about solutions and went for undertaking collective action. Being a president of the group, Hazera played an important role to mobilize other members; also, to make



communications with various stakeholders including UP Chair and other higher level CSOs at union and upazila level.

Over the months, they became popular in the area; many people came to know about their work and the people found a platform of their own for those who had real problems in their lives.

Hazera, by nature, had a passion for social work and she developed a sense of social responsibility to make good for others. Her two sons live in abroad; the family has good incomes to support others in need; Hazera has time also to do social work in favour of other people in her area.

The group led by Hazera carried out a range of actions to make a solution. She said, "Now I have confidence. In the past I was afraid; I did not know about the issues I am working now. Now I know many things. I am aware about child marriage in my area. When I see or come to know about drugs, I go with the group and protest. Now I have courage because we have a songghoton [CSO] and DASCOH also beside us." She added, "I go to the government offices, meet the officials and discuss on different services. Now we have information about the government services. We know about tothy odhikar [rights to information]."

The CSO organized songlaap [dialogue] with the Union Parishad [UP]. They asked the UP Chair about different social safety net benefits like VGD, VGF and bargained to issue cards for the marginal people in need. Hazera said, "In the past, they distributed cards confidentially and took bribe from beneficiaries. But days are over. Now we throw questions to them and ask them to be transparent in distributing the cards. I managed six cards for the people I know in my area. This was possible because now they know about us, our strengths."

"If we get information on child marriage, our first task is to let the family to understand about the negative consequences of child marriage. If we become failed, we inform UP members; also, the DASCOH Sir. We also have phone number like 109, 999 and make calls. We stooped eight child marriage in 2023 and four so far in 2024 in our area", Hazera described.

There was a woman in her area who was frequently tortured by her husband. In January 2024, They went together, organized a salish [local jurisdiction] and then ensured punishment of the husband. Hazera said that this type of work also warned others in the village but still child marriage and violence haven't stopped. She said, "There are families who hide child marriage, they organize it confidentially and we have nothing to do."

Hazera described about a poorer woman in her village who lost her husband. She had no child and after her husband's dead, the woman felt insecurity in her law's family. She decided to leave her parents in law's family to live with her natal family. She claimed mohorana [dower] from her parents in law but they denied to pay it. She sought help from Hazera to find a solution. One day Hazera and other CSO members went to parents in law's family, discussed with them and requested to pay taka 50,000 as her natal family also was poor. But still the parents in law were not agreeing to pay the dower. But at last Hazera

was successful. She said, “We were able to convince the parents in law for the mohorana. They agreed to give taka 10,000 only but it was not enough for the woman. If she buys goat, this was even not enough. We told about taka 50,000. At last, they agreed to give taka 20,000. The woman agreed.”

The spirit of Hazera’s such social work has been accelerated by her engagement in the YUKTA project. She received gender equality and songlaap [dialogue] training in 2023 and familiar with the issue of gender and other type of discrimination. She gave an example, “Parents do not give new dress to their girls as they [girls] most of the time stay in home. They always give new dress to boys only. This is a discrimination and we need to change it.” “There is a family in the village who did not agree to continue education for their daughter. I talked the family, was able to make them understood that girls are equally important. We have three female officers in Natore; we have female UP members also. A girl also can earn reputation for her family. At last, they understood and agreed to continue the girls’ education.”, she added.

Changing not the village people only but also her own family was an issue in Hazera’s life. Her husband did agricultural work and he was not happy with Hazera’s social work ignoring the family responsibility. But gradually he started to understand and became supportive to his wife. Hazera said, “I was able to convince him. He now supports me in my work.” “I did not receive dowry in the marriage of my two sons. My two daughters in laws are so good and the neighbours appreciate them. I wanted good daughters in law, not money”, she added.

Hazera changed not her husband only but also other men in her village. She observed a smaller number of incidents of violence against women compared to five years ago. She argued that this was a sign of change in men’s behavior.

Apart from her community, Hazera went to the meeting in school which took place in every three months. She also joined upazila level meeting regularly. She said, “Now many officers know about our work. DASCOPH organizes songlaap [dialogue] meeting every month. We ask the officers to know about the services for us. We meet with Jubo [youth] officer for training and supports for rearing duck and chicken; we met Somajseba officer [social services] for supports to person with disability; met with pashu department [livestock] for cattle rearing. I received training; also, helped six women to get the training. We received seeds from Krishi [agriculture] office, medicine from pashu [livestock] office; we get supports from police for neshadomon [drugs control]. We make questions to them in the meeting. We never did it before. Our confidence has grown up because of the project.”

Hazera argued that their work is for all, not for women or poor or any specific group. They work for rich people too as they also have problems like child marriage, violence against women in their families.

Despite her efforts, Hazera was still not happy because child marriage hasn’t stopped; the drugs were a critical problem for youth in the society. She said, “we are doing our work for the society. We want that the government will be with us in every step There are some families who are very poor and they need financial supports. We, alone, are not able to support all the poor families. We must need a support from the government.” “We need support from administration for neshadomon [drugs control]. Sometimes, we find them reluctant. We inform them, cooperate them but we do not receive cooperation”, she added.





Image 7: Information Fair

### Collective action of Students' Forum

Although the Students' Forum was a school based platform of students, the findings revealed that their actions were not confined to school only. They also carried out prevention activities in their communities and took part in the CSO-led democratic dialogue at union, upazila and district level.

The Students' Forum was largely involved in creating awareness on rights issue of other students in the school; they collectively participated in writing wall magazine, performing theatre; quiz competition and organizing knowledge fair as part creating awareness. The most remarkable action was drawing sexual harass map of school catchment area to prevent sexual harassment against girl students of the school.



Image 8: Students in a Knowledge Fair

At community, the students carried out door-to-door awareness activities, particularly to prevent child marriage of girls. They also discussed about the issues with their parents and relatives further to motivate for their rights.

A male student said,

“ Our first task was to increase awareness of the [rights] issues. We discussed the issues in the monthly meeting; we informed teachers; we also discussed at family level. We came to know that we can inform police for any incident of child marriage or violence against women or sexual harassment or drugs use. ”

[IDI, Natore]

A female student stated,

“ My role was to support the President of the forum in different activities. We organized monthly meeting to discuss about various issues like child marriage; sexual harassment against girls; violence against women etc. We also organized and performed theatre on child marriage; quiz competition; knowledge fair to create awareness and increase knowledge in the issues. We organized sudden meeting also if we came to know about a child marriage news in the community and to prevent it as soon as possible. ”

[IDI, Rangpur]



Image 9: Performing Popular Theater

Case story: **03**  
 Bristi: A school girl who protected herself from child marriage through Students' Forum

Bristi Khatun was supposed to get married when she was in class VIII. Then her parents got a proposal and informed Bristi as well about that. But Bristi didn't agree. Girls like Bristi in that area had less scope to deny a proposal endorsed by parents but Bristi denied it easily. This was because of Bristi's attachment to a Students Forum in her school which was facilitated by DASCOH Foundation under the YUKTA project.

Bristi joined the Students' Forum when she was in class VIII. It was a turning point also in her life; otherwise, she could be married off and dropped out in education. The Students' Forum is a group of 30 students from classes VIII, IX and X, and it consisted of 15 female and 15 male students. The students, who were interested and meritorious, usually prioritized for the forum.

Bristi was the sovaprodayn [president] of the Students' Forum and responsible for organizing all the activities of the forum. Its aim was to create awareness on child marriage, violence against women; sexual harassment against girl students; use of drugs etc. The forum met once in every month, discussed about the issues and went for actions as required.

"We discuss the issues in our monthly meeting. We knew about the issues before the project but not too much. The forum gives an opportunity to know about details. We talk about child marriage, sexual harassment—what to do— and then we aware others also", Bristi said.

According to Bristi, the problems of child marriage sexual harassment, violence against women were severe in her area; therefore, they were concern about the issues.

The forum carried out a range of activities to lessen these problems. Bristi described that they have performed theatre on child marriage and sexual harassment issue to create awareness; organized Information Fair on different issues including drugs to get services from Union Parishad and the government offices; some of them received training on attorokhay proshikkhon [self-defense] to save their lives; oriented to gender equality issue to reduce discrimination between girls and boys in families. She said, "In families, the head of a fish is given to boy, not to girl, and it's a gender discrimination, for example."

To address sexual harassment in public place, the forum made a harass map and identified the spots in red dots where perpetrators harassed school going girls. They discussed it with their teachers to undertake action against the perpetrators. Bristi said that because of their such initiative, the risk of sexual harassment reduced and they felt safe and secure in coming to school. "The school gate was one of spots for sexual harassment; we talked it our forum; also, informed our teachers. They made a gate with a help of Tofazzal saheb so that the perpetrators cannot enter into the school campus", she stated.

Because of the forum activities, the school environment had improved; the students built their confidence to raise voice against child marriage and sexual harassment. According to Bristi, the students discussed the issues with their family members also so that they could be aware about the problems. The attitudes of boys became positive; previously they also showed disrespectful behaviour to the girl students; their knowledge about gender and rights issue increased; the teachers became much encouraging compare to the past.

The school had separated toilets for girls and boys; the girl students had an opportunity to take rest in the common room, if needed, particularly during their menstruation period. There was an opportunity for getting napkin free of cost which was kept in the common room. The girl students needed to write their names only in a register before taking napkin.

Bristi's work was confined not in her school only but also attending meeting and dialogue in government offices at upazila level. DASHCOH organized dialogue with government officers where she got a scope to attend and talk. She also participated in the dialogue at union parishad; also, knew how to get information through rights to information application process.

Bristi had a dream to continue her education; she believed that her parents became aware about girls' rights and they would not impose any marriage proposal before completion of her education.

#### **Box 5: Drugs and role of students to control it**

*The findings revealed that addiction to drugs was an alarming issue in the study areas and youth in particular was at-risk of using drugs. This was an important agenda in the meeting of Students' Forum. They created awareness on this issue too as it produces risks of child marriage, violence against women including non-partner sexual harassment and other crimes. They were particularly aware if any student of the school or any of friends gets addicted to drugs.*

#### **5.2.4 Prevention of human rights violation and facilitating access to state services**

The awareness and collective action of the groups (both CSOs and Students' Forum) enabled them preventing targeted issues of human rights violation and better access to and services from state institutions. The section 5.3 discusses about it in details. In a critical examination of the YUKTA approach to promote gender equality and inclusive governance, the study revealed that the efforts were not limited to awareness and actions only; but also to ensure outcome of the actions.



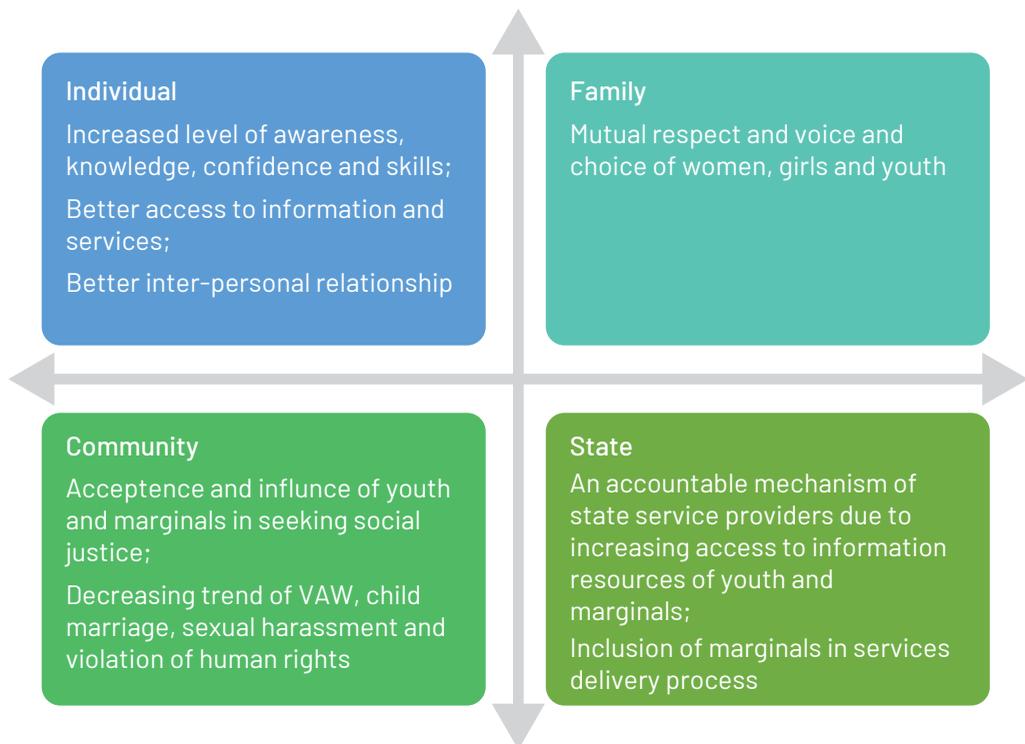
A female CSO leader said,

“ If we get information on child marriage, our first task is to let the family to understand about the negative consequences of child marriage. If we become failed, we inform UP members; also, the DASCOH Sir. We also have phone number like 109, 999 and make calls. We stooped eight child marriage in 2023 and four so far in 2024 in our area. ”

[IDI, Natore]

### 5.3 The changes domain and the perceived changes due to the project intervention

The study captured the perceived changes because of the awareness and actions described before. This section, as figure 4 illustrates, presents the changes in four domains: (i) individual (ii) family (iii) community and (iv) state, and both for community level CSOs and school based Students’ Forum.



**Figure 5:** The changes domain and the perceived changes due to project intervention

### 5.3.1 Individual level changes

The respondents identified a range of individual level changes which were made to them because of the project activities.

#### Individual level changes of CSO member

The CSO members, women in particular, were able to develop their leadership skills to mobilize collective action at different level. Their social networks were expanded; voices and bargaining capacity increased at public space and came to know about different services through right to information provision. The CSO members had better and increased knowledge also about the social problems and its mitigation process.

#### Individual level changes of student

Before the project, the students did not have any scope for extra curriculum activities. Their activities under the Students' Forum made them able to raise their voices. Their fear and hesitation to speak publicly was reduced to a large extent and they were confident to make it further. The level of knowledge was increased for their participation in quiz competition. The girl and boy students developed a respectful relation to each other; they also became disciplined and more attentive to lessons; the female students had more attendance in school and they were confident to combat sexual harassment attempt due to their self-defense training.



Kamran had family education not to disrespect women, and from the childhood his parents taught him to show respect women, whatever rich or poor, educated or not. When DASCOH officials came and met Kamran in his school, then he liked the officials and their discussions to work on women's rights, child marriage, sexual harassment. In recent years, he also noticed that addiction of drugs for many youths in his area was a big problem. As soon as he came to know about DASCOH purpose, he could not deny.

The DASCOH officials told that they would work on preventing child marriage; violence against women; child marriage and addicting of drugs involving the students of his school. The DASCOH official also explained dark side of these issue which Kamran liked.

The time was 2021. the head teacher was informed as well. They formed a Students' Forum consisted of 30 students from the classes VIII, IX and X and the gender ratio of students was 50:50.

The members of Students' Forum received training on theatre; 20 female students received self-defense training to protect them from any incident of sexual harassment to them. They were also oriented to the issues of gender equality and gender-based discrimination; child marriage, violence against women; also, the issue of drugs addiction.

Thus, their capacity was built and came forward to undertake collective actions to prevent child marriage and violence against women and sexual harassment in particular. Kamran said, "Our first task was to increase awareness of the issues. We discussed the issues in the monthly meeting; we informed teachers; we also discussed at family level. We came to know that we can inform police for any incident of child marriage or violence against women or sexual harassment or drugs use." according to him, lack of awareness was the key reason behind the problems; therefore, he believed that creating awareness would reduce the problems to a large extent. To create awareness, they performed theatre, wrote wall magazine, participated in quiz competition and day-based rallies; also, made counseling to individuals who were found a problem. The forum drew a harassment map to identify the spots in the school catchment area and then discussed with teachers to ensure safety of girls in those places.

Because of the activities, Kamran described that it has developed his level of self-confidence; he came to know how to speak in a forum; how to present a problem or issue to audience. "I had some misconceptions about women's rights but changed due to my work in the forum; why government introduced laws for women—I did not understand before. Now I can realize it well. If we want to establish women's rights, we have to work together. Being a boy, I also have responsibility for women's rights", he said.

Not Kamran himself only, he also found a change in the behaviour of his classmates and friends in his school. "I do not go alone; we all the forum members go together if we notice any incident. We went to the union parishad, talked to the Chairman for a child marriage occurrence. I see their behaviour also changed", he added. He also noticed a change among the teachers and they were more caring due to the project activities.

Kamran argued that because of their forum activities the incident of child marriage has reduced in society. They had students living in different areas who informed any case and then they together to protect a girl.

Kamran believed that men had important roles to prevent child marriage, violence against women and sexual harassment. He said, "Many may say that child marriage of girls, violence against women are women's issue. But these all are human right issue. Men also should be aware and responsible to protect human rights."

Kamran was concerned that many parents were not caring enough to their children and that's why they [son, in particular] were at risk of becoming drugs dedicated. Giving an example of rural family, he stated, "You can see that in the villages, women look for their ducks, chicken when sun is set; they feel tension if these not come back. But the parents do no look for their sons even after the sunset. It seems that they do not have any tension for their sons. It is spoiling many boys."



Case story: **05**  
 Reshma: A school girl in need for other girls for preventing child marriage and sexual harassment

Reshma Akhter (15) was noticed feeling proud when she described a sexual harassment incident two years back. She along with her bandobi [classmate and friend] was coming to school. Suddenly a boy stood in front of them and touched the body of her classmate. Reshma knew about some tactics of self-defense, and protected her bandobi from the boy pushing him away. Later, Reshma provided the same self-defense training to her bandobi also.

Reshma along with some other girls received that self-defense training under the YUKTA project being implemented in Laldighi Waqf Estate Di-Mukhi Uccho Biddyaloy, located in Bandargank upazila of Rangpur.

The project formed a Students' Forum in the school, consisted of 30 students, 15 girls and 15 boys, and Reshma was the Assistant President of the forum.

Being Assistant President, Reshma's role was to support the president of the forum in different activities. They organized monthly meeting to discuss about various issues like child marriage; sexual harassment against girls; violence against women etc. They also organized and performed theatre on child marriage; quiz competition; knowledge fair to create awareness and increase knowledge in the issues. The forum had practice to organize sudden meeting also if they came to know about a child marriage news and to prevent it as soon as possible.

Reshma heard about frequent child marriage incidents in her locality before 2021 which were ignored by local union parishad Chair and other influential people. She said, "Child marriage was a serious problem in our area. This is restricted in laws but Chairman had no interest to stop it."

Reshma found their activities as good alternatives to stop child marriage of many girls. Last year, one of her classmates was at a risk of married off when her parents told her about the marriage. Reshma and other forum members knew about the news, went to the family together; discussed with the parents and were able to convince them. The girl escaped and returned back to her schooling at last.

The forum activities helped Reshma a lot to develop her individual courage. She said, "I felt jorota [stigma] and could not dare to speak in front of others. Now I am confident enough to talk, even in a big meeting. If you ask me to take a class, I will be able to do it." The quiz competition in her school helped the students to increase level of knowledge in different issues. Manob Kollayn Parishad, the NGO partner of NETZ Bangladesh provided with set of books to the school library and reading practices increased among the students.

Reshma noticed a remarkable change in the attitudes of her male classmates and other boys in her school. "Some of the boys had bad attitudes to us. Now boys and girls work together; I see now they show us respect. Not inside the school only but also in outside,

the role of boys is important. They [the school boys] now advise other boys not to harass the girls.”

Reshma was found happy with the changes in her male classmates; she was also happy with her parents in family who previously gave eggs to her brother only. Because of her awareness, she discussed it with her parents and asked them not to make discrimination between son and daughter. It worked and Reshma told that her parents changed

The Students’ Forum confined their awareness activities not in school only. They frequently organized and discussed child marriage and violence issue in courtyard meeting in community. They knew that child marriage was a big problem in the area; many parents tried to marry off their daughters hiding the information. Reshma and the forum was aware about it and had efforts to prevent any possible child marriage in her locality.

Child marriage was a key reason for girls’ drop out in her school. According to Reshma, they had another issue which increased girls’ absentees in the school. She said, “Suppose, a girl has come to school but suddenly her sharirik somossay [menstruation] has started. What would she do? Many girls come from a faraway village. There was incident also that a girl had to go back to her home because of her sharirik somossay. We have napkin now in the teachers’ room; a mam is responsible for giving pad to the students who urgently need it. We just write our names only to take one pad.”

This Napkin provision was introduced in the school in 2021. The girl students voluntarily contributed money every month for the costs of napkin. They did not force anyone for money but students, who can afford, contributed for it. Although they had bandage, medicines etc., Reshma told that boys did not contribute.

Reshma noticed a change in her school but her friends from other schools did not have the activities. According to her, they also felt a need of doing such activities. She said, “The project is in our school only, not in other schools. I have friends in other schools; they said that they have problems in their schools. They also want it. I think Manob Kollayn should cover all the schools in this area.”

### Individual level changes of teacher

Not the students only but also the teachers were changed because of their engagement in the project activities. Their perceptions and mindset were changed; a better relationship developed with the students, and they were more supportive to the students. The stigma associated with sexual harassment and the sense of shyness also reduced among them.

#### Box 6: Use of gender sensitive vocabulary increased

*The findings revealed that the use of language and vocabulary was more gender sensitive. For examples, the students used “sovaprodhan” instead of “sovapoti” [president]; “jouno hoyrai” [sexual harassment] instead of “eve teasing”; “bokhate chele” instead of “dusto chele” [perpetrator]. They also became able to identify “nirjaton” [violence] easily which previously seen as normal thing. This gender sensitive vocabulary was also used by CSO members at community. In addition, they used “adhibasi” instead of “upajati” to refer small ethnic community in some of study areas.*



### 5.3.2 Changes at family

The individual level changed of the HRDs made a cumulative effect to the family relationship. The CSO activities of women and men increased mutual respect between husband and wife. The CSO women at family experienced a better and positive gender relation without any coercive behaviour of husband. The women's voice and choice also cared in family and they had a say in the decision making process.

Not the adult HRDs only but also the young students had a better position in individual families. They discussed about child marriage, violence issues with their parents and other relatives, and their preferences were valued.

### 5.3.3 Changes at community

This study did not have scope to collect population level quantitative data; it, therefore, focused on qualitative explorations of change at various levels. The interviews with different stakeholders revealed that findings revealed that they experienced a change in communities due to the project interventions. According to them, the occurrence of child marriage and violence against women was decreasing; the sexual harassment also against girls became a less occurring phenomenon due to collective resistance. At community, the local people identified CSOs as an opportunity to seek justice and they, in many respects, sought help of CSOs for a dispute or issue. According to the respondents, the CSOs and Students' Forum had an acceptance in community towards establishing social justice.

A union level CSO leader said,

“ I am a social worker; I am used to serve people in the past. I serve people but did not know about the process. From the project, I came to know about the process of serve the people—what the rights, where to go and why. We try to solve problems of different people. They come to us with their problems. I have earned trust of community people because of our work; we have acceptance to the community people. ”

[IDI, Natore]

### 5.4.4 Changes in accessing state services

The CSOs were able to build trust not only in community but also in the state machinery, from union to upazila to district level. The collective efforts made them capable for better connection and access to various government departments. It consequently helped them to receive better services in need. The social safety net package was one of best examples—they were able to issue cards such as maternity voucher for families who needed it. In some areas, they were also made committee members in union parishad;

An official of partnering NGO said,

“ The quarterly democratic dialogue reduced gaps between service provider and recipients; the dialogue is participatory and has open access to all. The government officials now treat the marginal people in positive way; they do not feel excluded. ”

[KII, Dinajpur]

Another official of partnering NGO said,

“ The CSO members receive extra attention to administration. This is because they are capable and can bargain. All know about it. The CSO members know where to go for what services; they know about rights to information. The service providers know about the CSO members. The knowledge and confidence level of CSO members have increased in dealing with the government officials. ”

[KII, Rajshahi]

Another CSO leader stated,

“ We also go to the upazila level meeting. Many officers know about our work. DASCOH organizes songlaap meeting every month. We ask to know what the services they [officials] can give us. We meet with police also; they help us to control drugs. I received training and helped six women to get the training. We received seeds, medicine from the government offices; we get support from police for drugs control. In the past, we did not know about the government services; now we have good relations with many of officers. ”

[IDI, Natore]



Moyna Begum (33) faced severe problem from her husband to do a paid job before. Her husband is a registered member of Bangladesh Ansar and Village Defense Force. Moyna also desired to be a member of the Ansar Force but her husband denied. Despite that, she received training in the force and knew about operations of arms. That made her confident to serve people.

When the official of DASCOPH Foundation met and talked to her in 2021, she thought that it would be an additional opportunity to serve the people in her society. So, she didn't disagree.

Moyna lives in Khanpur, a remote village in Mohonpur upazila of Rajshahi district. She has passed Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination and was little bit familiar with various social problems in the society. But her engagement with the YUKTA project opened her eyes. She said, "We live in village and we did not know the problems like now. After joining the JUKTA [YUKTA], I have learned many things ... child marriage, violence against women, information rights, and I know where to go to solve a problem."

Moyna was the President of "Khanpur Bagbazaar songothon", a village based CSO facilitated by DASCOPH Foundation. She took this responsibility not by herself, rather other members of the group made her President as she is brave in nature and able to deal with adverse situations. The group had 13 women and 12 men members in total, and all the members worked together to undertake an action.

"Suppose, we hear about a child marriage, then we will go together. We will talk to the family first; we will try to convince the parents. But if we become failed, we will inform members and Chairman [UP]. If they are found non-cooperative, we will go to the Mohila Office [Department of Women's Affairs] in upazila", Moyna described how they dealt an issue of child marriage in her area.

A few months ago, they heard about a child marriage preparation in a nearby village. Moyna along with some other CSO members went to the house, talked to the parents of the girl, and warned them about punishment in the law. They also told about health risks of the girl if she becomes pregnant in early age. The parents were not agreeing but later they were able to convince them, and the marriage was canceled.

Thus, Moyna described some incidences that she and the CSO managed well. "One of my neighbours told me that she needs a birth registration certificate from union office [UP] but the sachib [Secretary] there demanded bribe to issue the certificate. I went there, asked sachib how much money is needed for the certificate. He said, 700 taka. I did not believe it. Then I went to the UNO office, met him and applied for tothy odhikar [rights to information] to know about the costs. The UNO sent his team to the union office. One day, the sachib called me to get the certificate. Later I came to know that the birth registration certificate does not need money for a baby aged 0-45 days", she described.

Moyna felt pride that she met UNO and the UNO listened to her. Not the UNO only, she went to other offices in upazila. She knew the mohila officer [Upazila Women Affairs Officer] very well. She informed and talked to mohila officer if any issue of child marriage or cards (social safety net benefits) needed for any person. She said, "There was a woman in a family who tortured by her husband. The family was poor also. We met the husband, talked to him and informed about laws. The husband understood and committed to us that he would not torture again. The woman requested me if I can manage a VGF card for her. I went to the mohila office again, met the officer, and made an application for a card. At last, the woman got a card."

Moyna was well informed about rights to informant issue and the government services for the poor people. If she faced any difficulties in any office, she placed rights to information application to know about the real situations.

Moyna was particularly concerned for poorer women in her village. She had a daughter, aged of 10 who was in class V. Moyna could not continue her education but she wanted that her daughter would continue her education, at least to college level. She already discussed about it with her husband who was an auto driver in the area. The husband was a member of Ansar Force but recently he was staying in home due to some unrest in the force. Moyna had a paaner bor [betel leaf garden] and it's a good source of income for her family. She is also engaged in sewing of katha [clothes] from which she had some incomes.

Moyna told that she learned both women and men have equal rights; both can work to contribute to a family. According to her, JUKTA [YUKTA] means both. She described, "JUKTA means both husband and wife. If husband and wife work together, a family can be beautiful. My husband now can understand it. I am doing my work both for family and society."



## 6. Inclusive governance and democratic rights to participation and inclusion

What did “inclusive governance” [in Bangla, ontorvuktimulok sushashon] mean to the study participants, the CSO members and students in particular? The meaning was varied; however, there was common understanding too. By “ontorvuktimulok sushashon”, they meant access to and participation of all in the governance process.

*The project enabled the HRDs to develop 367 participatory action plans and organize 896 democratic dialogues for human rights protection and promotion. They resolved various issues through the democratic dialogues which included: access to social safety net benefits; access to government training on skills building and income generations; better services in Community Clinic; right to information; networks with different government departments.*

As the figure 5 shows, the project applied an inclusive approach to form the groups (CSO and Students’ Forum) and considered gender, ethnicity, religion, age, occupation and class perspective to make the groups diverse.

It promoted a democratic process also into the decision making and actions of the groups. The entire process was helpful to develop democratic values along with respecting each other; ensuring dignity of each member; encouraging participation of all and undertaking collective action for a common interest.



Image 10: A democratic dialogue at regional level

### Box 7: Democratic dialogue for making a responsible state institution

*The findings revealed that the democratic dialogue, popularly known as “songlaap”, of the project enabled the HRDs to inform the state officials about their situations further to bargain and negotiate about exercising their rights through a democratic manner. This dialogue took place at different levels, from union to district level, and created a demand to the officials by the HRDs. The findings also revealed that the dialogue enhanced a system of accountability and transparency of the duty bearers to allocate resources for the poor and marginal people.*

A man of Santa’l community described,

“ I have a songothon [CSO platform] where I meet and talk with other Banglaee people. We now have bhalobasha [love and respect] with the Banglaees. We sit together, discuss our problems together, and undertake actions together. ”

[IDI, Dinajpur]



Image 11: A quarterly democratic dialogue at district level

Laxi Ramasan (54) had a new experience of meeting and interacting with Banglaee people in his area. He was familiar with NGO-led group activities before but that were confined to his own community members only. The YUKTA project made an opportunity for him to meet and undertake collective action with Banglaees for ensuring their human rights.

Laxi came from Santa'l, a small ethnic group in Birol upazila of Dinajpur. Image His village name was Bohubaldighi; also, familiar as Karitaspara, located in a remote area of the upazila and close to Bangladesh-India border.

He joined the YUKTA's Bohubaldighi Nagorik Songothon in 2021, a village level CSO consisted of 25 members from both Banglaee and the Santa'l communities.

Laxi held a position of Secretary of the group, met each other in every month to discuss about their problems and find a solution. Not his village only but also his [Santa'l] community was hard-to-reach in terms of communicating with government departments to avail required services. This hard-to-reach situation, to some extent, reduced because of the YUKTA project as well the CSO activities in his area.

"We never knew about the government services—what to get, where to get, and how to get. The songothon [CSO] helped us to avail the services. We received three maternity vouchers for our community, one was for my family. We never received such services before", Laxi said.

Laxi was also aware about VGD, VGF, disability allowance from the government. He knew about laws related to child marriage, violence against women. He stated, "I can call at 999 if any child marriage or violence in my community or village. I never knew the number; I never talked to police before. Now I can call and it does not need any extra money."

Laxi, with a support from the CSO, managed seeds and fertilizer from the government agricultural department. He is a farmer and these were very helpful for him. He was familiar with rights to information issue to know about information for a service.

The most important benefits for Laxi are social, not personal. He found a platform where he could meet and talk with other Banglaee people. "We now have bhalobasha with the Banglaees. We sit together, discuss our problems together, and undertake actions together", he said. According to Laxi, it enhanced social harmony which was important for his community.

Despite that social harmony at village level, Laxi felt that they are still neglected to the government offices. Some [Banglaee] people argued that they [the Santa'l] have advantages in getting services because of the government quota system. But Laxi did not find any reflection of it in the government offices. He thought that some people of his community received government services because of the songothon [CSO], not for the quota system.

The Santa'l community was typically dependent on agriculture for pursuing their livelihoods. But recently they emphasized on education; some of Santa'l girls and boys enrolled in education, even at college level. The people like Laxi felt that they have equal rights to education. The YUKTA project had an influence to change these perceptions.

A school girl from Rangpur said,

“ Some of the boys had bad attitudes to us. Now boys and girls work together; I see now they show us respect. Not inside the school only but also in outside, the role of boys is important. They [the school boys] now advise other boys not to harass the girls. ”

[IDI, Rangpur]

A woman CSO leader in Rajshahi said,

“ ... one day I went to upazila and met UNO sir. He listened to me with care. Later, he sent a team to the union office for an investigation. They found the allegation true and one day, the sachib [Secretary] of the parishad made a phone call to me. ... I go to other offices also. There was a woman in a family who tortured by her husband. The family was poor also. We met the husband, talked to him and informed about laws. The husband understood and committed to us that he would not torture again. The woman requested me if I can manage a VGF card for her. I went to the mohila office [Department of Women Affairs] again, met the officer, and made an application for a card. At last, the woman got a card. ”

[IDI, Rajshahi]



**Figure 6:** YUKTA approach to promoting democratic rights and inclusive governance

## 7. The best practices in YUKTA project

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What did “inclusive governance” [in Bangla, ontorvuktimulok sushashon] mean to the study participants, the CSO members and students in particular? The meaning was varied; however, there was common understanding too. By “ontorvuktimulok sushashon”, they meant access to and participation of all in the governance process.

Based on analysis of data and evidences, and the case stories collected from the field, the study identified the following issues as the best practices of YUKTA project:

- **Addressing contextual needs in project design and implementation**

The study data as well as case stories revealed that the project appropriately identified the contextual needs in its design, and implemented as well. Lack of awareness of rights including child marriage; violence against women and deprivation in state services were remarkable pre-project situations in the study areas.

- **Gender parity in Students’ Forum**

The school-based Students’ Forum had gender parity in its formation and it was a good initiative to start thinking about gender equality and girls’ rights from the young age.

- **Gender equality and men engagement in CSOs**

The community based CSOs also had gender equality into its formation. Further, it ensured men engagement which was very necessary to ensure men’s roles and responsibilities for promoting human rights, particularly in the area of child marriage, violence against women; women’s rights and gender equality. It helped them to recognize equal rights for rights movement.

- **Participatory process for awareness and capacity building**

The entire capacity building process was participatory, which in turn, was helpful to empower the beneficiaries, the members of CSOs and Students’ Forum, and other stakeholders. This also helped to promote a locally-led solution approach in the project implementation.

- **Engaging youth into actions**

This was important to realize the potentials of youth in order to shape a better society in future. The findings explored that youth have an interest in gender equality; protecting women’s rights and inclusive governance. This is particularly important for rural society in Bangladesh where safety and rights of women and girls is a big concern.

- **Inclusion of marginal into collective action**

As same to men and youth, the project also engaged and included marginal and diverse groups of people into various actions which developed a sense of collective [“we”] in the power-based society. This was helpful to think beyond existing power structure further to ensure social harmony, equality and rights-friendly services delivery from the state institutions.

- **Collective action through federal CSO structure and process**

The project interventions were not silo in terms of encouraging and engaging people for a common interest. All the tiers (village, union, upazila and district) of CSOs had a connection and communication for collective action despite their individual identity [gender, class, religion, ethnicity etc.] of members. The intervention also helped to break existing rural-urban dichotomy for the CSOs’ federal linkage and action.

- **Inter-generational linkage through adults and youth**

The project made a unique provision for inter-generational linkage through connecting and interacting adults and youth for protecting human rights. The gaps between the two generations reduced and they became supportive to each other which was important for increasing voices and choices of youth.

- **Democratic values into the actions**

All the members either in CSOs or Students’ Forum had equality opportunity to participate and decide about an issue. The partnering NGOs did facilitation only, they didn’t impose any decision for them. It not only promoted democratic values but also enhanced leadership skills of the people engaged in CSOs and Students’ Forum.

- **Bridging demand and supply side stakeholders**

The project helped bridging the service providers and service recipients for a common interest. It enabled the people to demand rights by themselves and to make the service provider accountable for them. The Democratic Dialogue was an important tool for this bridging.



## 8. Lessons learned, challenges and way forward

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Given the fragile context of exercising rights in the study areas, the YUKTA project was an appropriate intervention to advance human rights situations through promoting gender equality and inclusive governance along with addressing violence against women and sexual harassment. The intervention worked well also and it, to a large extent, created a demand to seek social justice by the local people for improving their lives. The adult HRDs of CSOs at community and the young HRDs at schools were the catalyst of changes, for examples, to stop child marriage, violence against women; sexual harassment against girls; and addressing other emergency issues like addiction of drugs. The HRDs were also in a better position to make the duty bearers accountable for delivering services in equitable manner to the citizens.

The intervention, however, encountered some weakness and challenges into the implementation. The Key challenges were:

- Despite the provision of financial support to VAW/HR survivor, there was a reluctance among groups of people because of social stigma, and lack of enough security;
- The state institutions, the union parishad officials in some cases, perceived the HRDs as competitor in allocating the government resources;
- The perpetrator of sexual harassment was believed to be powerful with political connection and it was bit risky also for the non-political HRDs to come with a strong stand;
- The drugs issue also was sensitive to deal with. It involved risks due to mastanocratic (violent) attitude of the people involved in drugs use. The support of government administration was not enough against expectation;
- Child marriage hasn't stopped yet; some parents preferred to marry off their girl child confidentially;
- Prioritized good (meritorious) students for the Students' Forum; it lessened the scope of developing leadership skills of less meritorious students;
- All the good students only in the forum; the less good students have no scope to develop their leadership skills
- No any referral mechanism in the federal structure of the CSOs
- There was no sign of visibility of the project intervention to inform wide range of people;
- No livelihoods support, particularly for the extremely poor people.

The study recommends NETZ Bangladesh to rethink future project interventions to address the issues. It, in particular, suggests to consider:

1. Increase coverage of high schools in a same geographical area to strengthen the rights movement;
2. Increase number of workshop, meeting, training for a regular flow of motivation and influence;
3. Engage guardians, especially who have girl child, to ensure awareness as well as track and monitor child marriage at risk;
4. Make SMC members more active and involve upazila administration if needed;
5. Increase network and advocacy with upazila administration including police for safety and security in the work of combating sexual harassment and drugs use;
6. Keep provision of financial incentive for the extremely poor people, and
7. Increase media campaign at national level for advocating and influencing high officials of the government.



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