

## Mobilising Youth in Madrasas to End Violence Against Women and Girls in Bihar

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Violence against women and girls is the most widespread, yet the least recognised human rights violation in the world. Oxfam India is committed to ending this gender-based violence and ensuring that the poor and marginalised women claim and advance their rights. For instance, in Bihar, one of its focus states, Oxfam India has been supporting a network of six NGOs<sup>1</sup> since 2013, to end gender-based violence by promoting 'Mahila and Yuva Dastak Samitis'<sup>2</sup> – a forum for survivors of domestic violence to seek justice through non-formal justice mechanism. These Samitis are active in 120 villages in six districts in the state.

Bihar one of the poorest states in the country has shown an improvement in various socio-economic indicators in the last decade. As one of the fastest growing states<sup>3</sup> – its growth is greater than the national average – it has moved steadily upward in the development parameters. Higher economic growth has translated into higher expenditure in social services, viz. health, education, housing, water & sanitation, and social security. This has led to substantial reduction in poverty and improvements in development indicators (see Table 1). For instance, between 2005-06 (NFHS-3) and 2015-16 (NFHS-4), the spousal violence has reduced 15.8 percentage points.<sup>4</sup>

Though these figures are commendable, it continues to pale against national numbers. While spousal violence has seen a decline from 59 percent to 43.2 percent, it continues to remain above the national figure of 28.8 percent. Similarly, while literacy rate has improved between 2001 and 2011 – 47 percent to 63.82 percent – it continues to remain the state with the lowest levels of literacy.<sup>6</sup>







Within the state, the Muslim community has lagged behind even more. Even after five years of the Sachar Committee report, the 68th round of the NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation) survey showed that in 2011-12, Bihar's Muslims lagged behind on all development indices, including the four districts<sup>7</sup> of the Seemanchal region where their numbers are high.<sup>8</sup>

Oxfam India works in Kishanganj – one of the districts from the Seemanchal quartet. According to religious census 2011, the district has a 68 percent Muslim population. It has an economic index, educational index, material well-being index and health index of 0.49, 0.55, 0.54 and 0.23 respectively for people of the general category.<sup>9</sup> For Muslims, these figures are 0.32, 0.15, 0.10 and 0.24 respectively.<sup>10</sup>

For women it is worse. Studies in the past have shown that conservative interpretation of Islam and the various social, economic and political constraints have further contributed to the marginalisation of women. Though violence against women has declined, it, along with gender discrimination continues to pose a problem that needs to be tackled.

Oxfam India has been supporting Kishanganj-based NGO RAHAT (Rapid Action for Human Advancement Tradition), a women's rights organisation, since 2013 to create awareness and build capacities of marginalised sections of the society, especially women, to end gender-based violence. RAHAT works in 20 villages in two blocks in Kishanganj. RAHAT is a part of the network of the six NGOs that Oxfam India formed in the state.

**TABLE 1: ECONOMIC & SOCIAL PROGRESS IN BIHAR**

	BIHAR	ALL INDIA
 <b>GROWTH RATE OF GSDP (%) DURING 2005-06 TO 2014-15</b>	<b>10.5</b>	<b>#</b>
 <b>GROWTH RATE (%) IN 2014-15 [AT CONSTANT PRICES]</b>	<b>9.4</b> (% OF GSDP)	<b>7.2</b> (% OF GDP)
 <b>PER CAPITA EXPENDITURE ON SOCIAL SERVICES IN 2014-15 (IN INR)</b>	<b>2849</b>	<b>#</b>
 <b>DECLINE IN POVERTY (IN PERCENTAGE POINTS) DURING 2004-05 TO 2011-12</b>	<b>20.7</b>	<b>15.3</b>
 <b>DECLINE IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE<sup>5</sup> (IN PERCENTAGE POINTS) DURING 2005-06 TO 2015-16</b>	<b>15.8</b>	<b>8.4</b>
 <b>INCREASE IN LITERACY RATE (IN PERCENTAGE POINTS) DURING 2001 TO 2011</b>	<b>17.9</b>	<b>10.9</b>

#Corresponding figures for All-India are not available

Source: Economic Survey 2015-16, Govt. of Bihar; Economic Survey 2015-16, Govt. of India; Census of India and National Health and Family Welfare Survey (NFHS), SRS Bulletin, Dec. 2016.

### MAKING INROADS IN THE MADRASAS

#### 2013

Oxfam India partners with RAHAT- a Kishanganj-based NGO, to work with marginalised communities to end violence against women and girls.

#### 2015

RAHAT approaches the madrasas; holds talks with ulemas and maulvis; holds sessions in madrasas for girls.

#### 2016

Regular weekly sessions were being held in the madrasas for girls. These sessions were attended both by teachers and students.

#### 2017

Regular sessions begin in madrasas for boys. Committees similar to Tahaffuz-e-Khawateen were formed in the boys madrasas.



*Girls at the Jamia Aisha Ul-Islamia convene in large numbers to attend sessions on gender discrimination and domestic violence*

## REACHING OUT TO YOUTH IN MADRASAS

When RAHAT approached women to address issues of gender discrimination and domestic violence they found very few adolescents in the villages. “Both boys and girls were missing from the mainstream schools as well as the villages. We wanted to reach out to them to form the *Yuva Dastak Samitis*. It then turned out they had been sent off to madrasas in the district,” explains Farzana Begum, Secretary, RAHAT.

In 2015, RAHAT approached the madrasas (institution for Islamic instruction), in order to address issues of discrimination and gender-based violence among adolescents (boys and girls). With a 68 percent Muslim population, Kishanganj has about 75 madrasas.<sup>11</sup> The last few years has seen a spurt in the number of madrasas for girls.

“Earlier they were few and far between. They come here from the neighbouring states as well. While the girls learn about religion, language, science, there is no discourse on gender discrimination and domestic violence. The truth is, this is all pervasive. Domestic violence is everywhere, they see it around them, and are also the victim at times. It is important to start this discussion when they are young and mobilise them to end domestic violence,” says Farzana.

So while the work with women in villages continued, they began a new strand of work with the adolescents at madrasas. The math was simple — by reaching out to the youth in madrasas, RAHAT could reach out to as many families and villages, even neighbouring states. For instance, the Jamia Aisha Ul-Islamia has 1305 students, 300 of whom stay at the hostel in the madrasas. The girls in this madrasa come from all over Bihar as well as neighbouring states like Jharkhand, Assam, and Sikkim.

Oxfam India and RAHAT began working with adolescent girls and boys in madrasas in 2015. Four madrasas — two for boys and two for girls — were selected. Oxfam India, through RAHAT, reaches out to over 2000 children through the madrasas.

## APPROACHING RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The rising number of madrasas for girls in the last five years is an indication that though parents want to educate their daughters, they want to do it by staying within the realms of Islam. Moreover, the community vests a lot of faith in the maulvis and ulemas to solve their domestic as well

as community problems. The madrasas and the religious leaders thus became the focal point for RAHAT.

“In order to reach out to the larger community, it was thus important to start the conversation with the religious leaders. The first step was to convince them that we wanted to work with them and not against them. They are often kept out of these debates and discussions because they seem to be too set in their ways and unlikely participants,” she says.

RAHAT invited maulvis and ulemas to community meetings. These meetings were useful to orient the religious leaders about violence against women and girls, its different manifestations, and gender inequality. “We showed them how violence against women and girls affected everyone else in the society. We invited them to speak at forums on issues related to education, health, livelihood promotion, child rights, and violence against women. It has worked. In the last couple of years, they have started approaching us with cases of domestic violence that they come across during their interaction with the communities,” says Farzana.

## GAINING ACCESS TO MADRASAS

RAHAT helped the religious leaders solve a few cases of domestic violence. This was crucial for building confidence and gaining access to madrasas, which traditionally have been closely guarded. In 2015, RAHAT started holding meetings at the girls’ madrasas. Initially meetings were held for teachers every Sunday. “These meetings were not mandatory for students but they would come in droves for these sessions. During the meetings, discussions were held on education, health, gender-related issues, and violence against women and girls,” says Farzana.

The enthusiasm of students was evident during an impromptu meeting held on a Friday afternoon in February earlier this year. Friday is a weekly off for the girls yet the Jamia Aisha Ul-Islamia ground was a sea of bobbing heads, covered in white hijab, twinkling eyes, giggles and bright smiles. Despite the holiday, it was a full house for the meeting on domestic violence. Not only did they sit through the meeting, they took turns to recite poems and essays on importance of education and women’s empowerment in ending gender discrimination and violence against women.

When RAHAT started working in 2015, their counsellors would address students and teachers on domestic violence, and the different aspects of violence — physical, sexual, mental and economical. Information regarding the different Acts relevant to women and girls was disseminated. This





**Maulvis and Ulemas hold a session on gender discrimination at Darul Uloom Amjadiya Kadam Rasool, a madrasa for boys in Kishanganj**

included the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO Act).

Kishanganj shares its borders with Nepal and West Bengal and is very close to the Bangladesh border. This has made the district vulnerable to high incidence of human trafficking. Apart from domestic violence, RAHAT also took up issues regarding trafficking and the relevant Act. Sessions were held to guide teachers and students to take legal actions to fight violence.

Meetings were regularised in 2016. This helped expand their views on domestic violence. "We should have received this exposure long back. Earlier we either didn't understand violence. When we did recognise violence and realise it was wrong, we were unable to raise our voice or take action. Even now when we talk to women, their first reaction is 'but what can we do?'" At least we can now offer solutions," says Naazneen Begum, a teacher at the madrasa.

As the meetings became regular, girls opened up about the cases they saw around them. The girls were encouraged to speak to their families and neighbours regarding violence against women and girls; not just with women but also men and boys. "When we go back home, we discuss different types of domestic violence and avenues that can be used to end violence against women and girls. We speak to our families and women in the neighbourhood. For women, domestic violence means physical violence. When they learnt about mental, sexual and economic violence, they started seeking help," says Anjum, a third year student at the madrasa.

Prior to counselling, there was a fear of being stigmatised for talking on issues related to domestic violence. Especially since violence against women and girls, across communities, is considered par for the course. This has been internalised to the extent that they did not think it needed to be stopped. Moreover, they did not know how to stop it. The presence and easy accessibility to counsellors from RAHAT has boosted the confidence of the girls.

The big change for both students and teachers is the confidence in talking about and addressing issues of violence against women and girls. Now the students are eager to discuss their problems with the teacher-student committee formed by RAHAT. These problems range from physical violence in the neighbourhood to sexual exploitation within the family. Cases of trafficking too have cropped up at the committee meetings. These committees create awareness and provide solutions.

## TEACHER-STUDENT COMMITTEE

To be able to discuss their problems, students and teachers would wait for RAHAT's weekly visits to the campus. Therefore, a need was felt to form a committee within the madrasas, which could discuss cases

independent of RAHAT. The first Tahaffuz-e-Khawateen committee (loosely translated as 'security of women') was formed in Jamia Aisha Ul-Islamia, in November 2016.

The committee comprised 24 members – 20 teachers (10 male and 10 female) and 4 students. Men were included in the committee so that they understood the perspective of women and girls, and of the violence perpetrated against them. The convenor is a female teacher so that girls do not hesitate to discuss the cases. The committees hold group and individual counselling. Though meetings are held every Sunday, the committee can be approached any time during the week. This inclusive outreach strategy has been well-received by both the faculty and students.

These committees have become popular among the neighbouring villages as well. They often approach the committee for help. RAHAT has connected members of the Tahaffuz committee with police officers from 'mahila thana' (women police stations) and lawyers from the district legal services authority. The police officers have briefed a few meetings at the madrasas and offered support to the women and girls.

Since 2015, nearly 15 cases have been brought to RAHAT; after the committee was formed, seven complaints have been received. They are in different stages of being addressed. The Tahaffuz committee has played a critical role in bringing the society and lawmakers together.

These committees also lay stress on gender equality, women's empowerment and the importance of economic independence. "Though there is a visible change in the students since we started working with them, there are certain social norms that are deeply entrenched. For instance, while on the one hand they aspire to be like the Olympians, on the other hand they continue to believe that women are 'delicate' and 'not tough'. But this thinking will change sooner than later," says Farzana.

## COUNSELLORS AND RESOURCE CENTRES

While the Tahaffuz committee meets weekly, there is a need to set up a 24-hour help desk within the madrasa. "We received feedback that immediate counselling was sought in emergency situation and waiting for the weekly Sunday meeting wouldn't be feasible. So now we want to train counsellors from within the Tahaffuz committee," says Farzana.

Training counsellors will meet two objectives: One, the girls will get immediate help and support, and two, this will empower the committee members to continue supporting the girls even if RAHAT and Oxfam India were to pull out from the madrasa.

Apart from training counsellors, RAHAT plans to set up a Resource Centre. The Centre will seat the counsellor and serve as information centre for the students. RAHAT and Oxfam India propose to stock the Centre with books and IEC (information, education and communication) material, primarily on, domestic violence and the different Acts.



**Teacher-student committee at the Jamia Aisha Ul-Islamia**

## COUNSELLING BOYS

"While it was important to address the issue of domestic violence among women and girls, it is essential to engage with men and boys. Violence against women and girls will not end unless everyone understands and accepts that this is wrong and completely unacceptable," says Farzana.

After gaining access to the girls' madrasa, RAHAT approached the boys' madrasas. Not far from the Jamia Aisha Ul-Islamia is the madrasa for the boys, Darul Uloom Amjadiya Kadam Rasool. This madrasa has been there for the last 13 years and has nearly 400 boys.

This has been a good forum to address the boys, and the maulvis and ulemas on issues related to gender discrimination and domestic violence. While they agree that domestic violence needs to be addressed and ended (they propose that girls should be allowed to take a decision regarding their marriage), they also believe that men are superior to women. During an interaction with one of the maulvis, he praised RAHAT's effort to address domestic violence among boys because 'they would be the *maalik* of at least 400 households'. With regular sessions and interactions, it is this mindset that RAHAT hopes to make a dent in as well.

The boys' madrasa also has a committee similar to the girls'. This committee addresses issues of domestic violence that boys have either witnessed at home, neighbourhood, or have been approached by their communities. "The boys regularly go back to their homes. Counselling sessions have helped them identify different types of domestic violence. They come to us with problems, what we are unable to solve we take it to RAHAT. This association has ensured that most problems that come to us are solved," says Qazi Ayaz Ahmed, head of the boys' madrasas.

The intervention at the boys' madrasas is more recent than the girls'; RAHAT approached the boys' madrasas in 2017 January, while the work with the girls' madrasas started sometime in 2015. "With boys it takes extra effort to discuss domestic violence and gender discrimination. It



*Young boys attend a session on domestic violence at the Darul Uloom Amjadiya Kadam Rasool madrasa*

is important to explain that men and women are equal, and any violence against women and girls is wrong not just for the individual but also for the whole society," explains Farzana.

They are working in about 10 madrasas in the district but at present only four madrasas (two boys and two girls) have committees. Oxfam India and RAHAT have reached out to over 2000 students through madrasas. By working with religious leaders Oxfam India and RAHAT have made further inroads into the communities, especially the men. Training and counselling young students, is critical to mould the future generation to be gender-sensitive and gender-equal, and, not accept violence against women and girls as par for the course.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> RAHAT, Muzaffarpur Vikas Mandal, Nari Gunjan, Nirman, Disha Vihar, and Samajik Chetna Kendra

<sup>2</sup> Solanki, Pinki (2016). 'Mobilising Communities to End Violence Against Women in Bihar and Jharkhand'. Oxfam In Action No. 29, August 2016. <https://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/OIA-Mobilising-Communities-to-End-Violence-Against-Women-in-Bihar-and-Jharkhand-22082016.pdf> (as accessed on September 1, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> In the Financial Year 2014-15, Bihar has emerged as the fastest growing state in terms of gross state domestic product (GSDP).

<sup>4</sup> Golder, Sakti. (2017). 'Development in Bihar: Some Policy Prescriptions from Gender Lens', Policy Brief No. 24, July 2017. <https://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/Development%20in%20Bihar%20Some%20Policy%20Prescriptions%20from%20Gender%20Lens.pdf> (as viewed on September 11, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> It takes into account, Physical and/or Sexual Violence. Compiled from NFHS Fact Sheets 2015-16.

<sup>6</sup> Census of India 2011

<sup>7</sup> Araria, Kishanganj, Katihar, Purnea

<sup>8</sup> Ghosh, Abantika (2015). 'From Seemanchal to Nalanda, a Muslim lag in development'. Indian Express. September 28, 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/from-seemanchal-to-nalanda-a-muslim-lag-in-development/> (as viewed on September 11, 2017)

<sup>9</sup> The indices have been drawn up based on a set of criteria with a higher index standing for greater development. Economic index takes into account criteria such as monthly per capita income, salaried households etc. Material well-being index takes into account household assets, availability or otherwise of LPG and electricity and other amenities. Education index takes into account female literacy, adult literacy, expenditure on education and other such criteria.

Health index is based on the availability of healthcare for married women and their children, immunisation, antenatal care etc. Ghosh, Abantika (2015). 'From Seemanchal to Nalanda, a Muslim lag in development'. Indian Express. September 28, 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/from-seemanchal-to-nalanda-a-muslim-lag-in-development/> (as viewed on September 11, 2017)

<sup>10</sup> Ghosh, Abantika (2015). 'From Seemanchal to Nalanda, a Muslim lag in development'. Indian Express. September 28, 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/from-seemanchal-to-nalanda-a-muslim-lag-in-development/> (as viewed on September 11, 2017)

<sup>11</sup> According to inputs provided by Oxfam India partner- RAHAT

**AUTHOR: SAVVY SOUMYA MISRA**

**INPUTS: RANJANA DAS, PRATIUSH PRAKASH, FARZANA BEGUM, DIYA DUTTA, RANU KAYASTHA BHOGAL**

**PHOTO CREDIT: SAVVY SOUMYA MISRA**

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Oxfam India | 4th and 5th Floor, Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, 1, Copernicus Marg, New Delhi 110001

Tel: +91 (0) 11 46538000 | Web: [www.oxfamindia.org](http://www.oxfamindia.org)

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