

**A Glimpse on**  
**South Asian Change Makers Assembly 2010**  
**Dhaka, Bangladesh**  
**22nd to 26th June 2010**



Oxfam GB and the WE CAN Alliance to End Domestic Violence, Bangladesh jointly organised a five day long 'South Asian Change Makers Assembly' during 22-26 June 2010 in Bangladesh. Oxfam GB launched the WE CAN Campaign across the South Asia region in 2004 with the aim to breaking the silence on domestic violence and reduce its social acceptability. Now the campaign has been extended to countries in East Asian and East African regions by other Oxfam affiliates. In the South Asia region, a total of 3 million individuals are involved with the campaign by pledging neither to participate in nor accept VAW. Such individuals are identified as Change Makers and, as well as altering their own behaviour and attitudes, they are also advocating to others. In Bangladesh, the WE CAN Alliance is leading the campaign, with Oxfam GB in a facilitating role. Oxfam is also a member of national alliance.

**A brief on WE CAN Campaign:**

Violence against women has an institutional validity all over the world. In the South Asian context, one in every two women experience violence in their daily life. WE CAN is a South Asian regional campaign aiming to deal with the violence women endure daily, both within their homes and within the wider society. This campaign has raised large scale public awareness of bias, inequality and violence against women, particularly domestic violence, and aims to trigger widespread attitudinal change and a concomitant enhancement of rights. The campaign is being taken forward by over 2,400 organisations in six countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The central force of the campaign is people who bring change – Change Makers. There are over 3 million Change Makers who are actively committed to end VAW and influence others to choose a similar path. The number of Change Makers is growing with each passing day. For detailed information on the campaign, please visit the campaign website [www.wecanendvaw.org](http://www.wecanendvaw.org)

The first South Asian Change Makers assembly was held in Sri Lanka in March 2006 and the second one in Bangladesh. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> assembly, around 120 Change Makers from South Asian countries and 450 local Change Makers participated. The assembly included participants from all over the country with a highly interactive format. Apart from the inaugural and closing sessions in Dhaka, the assembly included time spent in the field, interacting and working with Change Makers, exchanging views, participating in formal and informal events and sharing challenges and learning.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> June, there was a grand opening event held in Dhaka. Over the next three-days, participants visited around 28 districts (out of 64) in Bangladesh and participated in at least 300 small events at community level, interacting with local Change Makers, allies, local government bodies, students, teachers, lawyers, journalists and the general public etc. On 26<sup>th</sup> June, overseas and local Change Makers participated in a day-long closing event in Dhaka. The closing programme comprised seminars, informal discussions, a closing plenary session and cultural events. Throughout, this programme was designed to be highly interactive and was carried out in a festive mood.

## Inaugural Event (22nd June 2010)

The assembly was inaugurated by Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chawdhury, MP, the honourable Minister of Women and Children's Affairs, while the Chairperson of the concerned parliamentary standing committee Ms. Meher Afroz, MP was the special guest. Ms. Sultana Kamal, Chair of the Bangladesh WE CAN Alliance, presided over the session. Change Makers, celebrities, representatives from concerned government ministries, donors, INGOs, NGOs, civil society groups were present. Country representatives (Change Maker) leading the event hoisted their own flags and balloons with campaign messages and assembly themes. Change Maker Dr. Nowfel Muhammed Junaid from Sri Lanka welcomed participants and outlined the context and background of the regional WE CAN Campaign. Alliance member from Bangladesh, Ms. Shaheen Anam, Executive Director of Manusher Jannyo Foundation, gave the reception speech on behalf of the Bangladesh alliance.

The chief guest, Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chawdhury expressed her solidarity with the campaign with a view to build a violence free Bangladesh, which is also an aim of the present government. She urged the society as a whole to establish an environment where women can live free of violence, exercising their rights equally.



Photo: inauguration of the assembly

She expressed the present government's commitment to ratify reservations on CEDAW, introduce a revised/new policy on the advancement of women and violence against women. The minister also emphasised that the government alone cannot ensure the reduction of violence against women, either through new laws or changes to the administration; the active support of WE CAN Change Makers is needed to ensure laws and policies are successfully implemented.

Special guest Ms. Meher Afroz, MP assured participants that she would raise the domestic violence issue in the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Women and Children's Affairs. She also updated participants on the Domestic Violence Act, which has already been agreed by the Bangladesh cabinet of ministries and sent to parliament for approval. She also gave assurances that the Domestic Violence Act is a priority for the government and will become law within the lifetime of the current parliament.

Sri Lankan Change Maker Dr. Nowfel Muhammed Junaid introduced the WE CAN Campaign context and achievements so far throughout South Asia. He mentioned that violence against women, particularly domestic violence, was a silent issue in this region. But now the silence has been broken and people are openly and widely discussing it. This campaign is close to our hearts because it focuses on individual attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and practice and right now three million Change Makers are actively disseminating the campaign. Simultaneously, these individuals are extending this campaign into their own arena – family, friends, neighbours, relatives and workplaces. As a whole, WE CAN have emerged as a social movement in South Asia.

Alliance member Ms. Shaheen Anam conveyed her deep felt thanks to all participants on behalf of Bangladesh WE CAN. She also expressed gratitude to the guests and others. Shaheen Anam provided an overview of the Bangladesh campaign and presented a

synopsis of the achievements of the Alliance thus far. She raised the issues, concerns and challenges of Violence Against Women related work, including laws, policies which are not women friendly, and the patriarchal structure of government and local government. This latter point particularly impacts the women who survive domestic violence. She also raised the delays in passing the Domestic Violence Act and the women's advancement policy in Bangladesh. She assured the government through the honourable chief guest that 600,000 WE CAN Change Makers have emerged as a radical force in Bangladesh and they can carry over the responsibility to popularise any new policy or amendments to protect women's rights. The Chair, Ms. Sultana Kamal, thanked all participants and requested for everybody's participation in the next 5 days of assembly.

In the inaugural session, Rupantar, a key WE CAN partner in Bangladesh, demonstrated a traditional cultural show (*pot song; blend of song, dance, commentary, drama with visual slide show*) based on the campaign and assembly theme. Change Makers enjoyed the opening events by singing, dancing and expressing their feeling to each others.



Photo: pot song on regional WE CAN Campaign

National print and electronic media dedicated a high degree of coverage to this event. TV channels telecast the assembly on the same day. On the following day the event emerged as important news in most of the widely circulated newspapers in Bangladesh.

Newspapers also published special features on the assembly and the WE CAN Campaign. TV channels telecasted several talk shows (discussion) which included the participation of Change Makers and allies.

### Field Trips: Districts Events (23rd to 25th June)

Participants travelled to the field on the following day. Change Makers were divided in to 15 groups and visited around 28 districts throughout the country.

Two Change Makers (one from overseas and one from Bangladesh) formed a pair and worked together for the next two days. The pairs were matched based on their age, sex, education and profession. They interacted and worked with each other.



Photo: pairs are exchanging views to each other

Each pair participated in two or three local events, including campaigning in villages, schools, colleges, youth clubs and taking part in discussions with local alliances, local government bodies, lawyer associations, journalists associations, police, NGOs, nurses. They also participated in cultural events. Simultaneously, pairs shared their learning and experiences in formal and informal settings. As a whole, the pairs participated in around 300 events at field level.



Photo: events at districts



Photo: lunch together in field

### Closing event (26th June 2010)

A total of 600 Change Makers participated in the closing event, of which 240 had formed pairs and campaigned in the field. The closing event was divided into two parts: in morning session, there were four separate workshops running concurrently and in afternoon all participants came together for the plenary session to express solidarity and participate in cultural events.

Around 100 Change Makers participated in each workshop. There were moderators and panel discussants. Initially Change Makers gave an overview of their work, sharing experiences and challenges, then moderators and discussants gave their opinions. There followed an open discussion followed to capture common themes and learning.



Photo: workshop

The workshops topics were: Role of Change Makers in promoting the WE CAN Campaign, the institutionalisation of campaign, the Alliance's role, and the Domestic Violence Act: updates and experiences so far. Please see the workshops summary end to this report.

In the afternoon, the plenary session opened with cheerful cultural presentations by each country. Then the invited guests and celebrities presented their speeches of solidarity. The guests were: eminent economist Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, Chairman-SUJON (a network on governance), Mr. Gareth Price Jones, Country Director, Oxfam GB, Bangladesh, renowned women's activist Ms. Ayesha Khanom, Chairperson, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad, and Ms. Habibun Nahar, MP. In addition to representatives from government

ministries/departments, civil society, I/NGOs, donors, and professional groups, Change Makers from each country also shared their views, experiences and feelings. Bangladesh WE CAN Chair, Ms. Sultana Kamal also presided over the closing event.



Photo: closing event-cultural program



Photo: closing event – solidarity expression

Change Maker Josna Begum from Bangladesh illustrated her painful life due to repression by her husband since the beginning of their marriage and the way she transformed her pain to joy after becoming a Change Maker:

*“The campaign changed my life, my husband was a brutal perpetrator, I thought nothing could change him. But the booklets and storybooks of WE CAN made realise him how he is, how society looks at him and how violence was putting his family in an even worse situation.. Simultaneously, I tried to motivate him to change his attitude and behaviour - as I learned from Change Maker meetings, and finally I succeeded. I didn’t just enrol my husband as a Change Maker; together, we enrolled a number of Change Makers in our para (small part in a township). People from our community are following our example”.*

Another Change Maker Sultan Mahmood shared his experience of how he changed his own behaviour and organised a group of people as Change Makers.

Change Maker Dr. Muzzamil Bhatti related the problems of promoting the campaign in Pakistan.



Photo: closing event-solidarity expression

She raised the interesting issue that WE CAN gives an opportunity for coming to Bangladesh and she has been impressed with the work of her fellow Change Makers in Bangladesh. On this occasion, she apologised to the Bangladeshi people, in her own words *“as a Pakistani national, I apologise to Bangladeshi people, particularly to the women, for our role in the 1971 liberation war”.*

Change Maker and key Nepali alliance member Ms. Sarada Pokhrel shared their experience in mobilising all political parties regarding WE CAN and how it impacted on the Nepali campaign. Sachi Kumari from India shared experiences of mobilising *Gram Panchayet* into WE CAN campaign.

Professor Muzaffar Ahmed defined domestic violence as a social disease and emphasised the strengths of a long term campaign like WE CAN. He also promised to reflect the issues of the We Can Campaign into their future work.

Mr. Gareth Price Jones, Country Director of Oxfam GB, Bangladesh, thanked all participants sincerely for their commitment, courage and activism. He reiterated Oxfam GB's commitment to gender based violence work. He also assured participants that Oxfam initiated this campaign and will continue its support up to next year. Simultaneously, Oxfam will contribute as an alliance member and integrate this campaign into all development initiatives.

Ayesha Khanom expressed her solidarity with the campaign and assembly. She emphasised that Violence Against Women is a socio-political issue and the situation of women will remain unchanged, until and unless we can protect their dignity and equal participation in all respects. WE CAN is a campaign that is working to enhance women's dignity at the personal, family and societal level. That is why WE CAN is close to our heart.

Sultana Kamal, Bangladesh WE CAN Chair, closed the assembly and urged the participants to build up an environment where women can live free of violence, exercise equal rights and urged that everybody can take a stand against VAW. She called for the building of a South Asia where women could attain a new and higher position of dignity within society. She said "We shall have to keep up our efforts to establish equal rights and equal dignity for women in all spheres of society".

Finally, through this assembly we attained the recognition and acknowledgement of the WE CAN Campaign in Bangladesh, as well as bringing the voices of Change Makers to Government level. Simultaneously, participant Change Makers shared their views and experience, which raised the campaign's profile and encouraged the continuing emergence of as a key part of the development agenda in South Asia.

#### **Few more photos in action:**



Photo: participants welcomed in a village



Photo: young pairs are in informal chat



Photo: meeting with a Union Parishad



Photo: participants singing and dancing

## Key learning and action points

### 1. Change Makers development activities should be continued:

During the assembly, Change Makers shared their achievements, challenges and future plans in formal and informal settings. Change Makers shared their experiences in opening and closing events, in district level meetings and in plenary workshops. Though most the challenges are country specific, a common trend emerged that Change Makers are much better at leading the campaign within their own arenas. They urged that the WE CAN Campaign be continued, but they require effective support from allies and organisations regarding conceptual issues and update information. We thus need to have a plan regarding the development of Change Makers. We should also examine expanding the Change Makers role to include other social issues like eve teasing, inclusion of women in to social and traditional structures like *Salish*, local committees etc.

### 2. Ensure civil society participation in WE CAN Alliances:

Approaches and ways of working with different levels of alliances was a widely discussed issue in the assembly. The common consensus was that Change Makers required support from other actors such as professional groups, local government, local elites and institutions to develop a wider synergy in realizing the campaign's objectives. Change Makers also felt that establishing effective channels of communication between village level Change Makers and district and national level alliances is essential. Hence, we need to emphasise a wider and more holistic approach to alliance building.

### 3. More involvement of educational institutes

One key learning of this assembly was that institutional involvement will allow a greater integration of this campaign within a particular area, which the Change Makers alone will be unable to accomplish. In different countries, numbers of institutions are involved with the campaign. These include schools, colleges, youth clubs, cultural organisations, local government bodies, professional groups etc. Particularly, educational institutions can be vital and effective vehicles in promoting campaign messages and themes in a sustainable manner. Consequently, Change Makers strongly urged that work with educational institutes should be continued in a more organised and strategic manner.

## A summary on the workshops

Each workshop began with experience sharing from Change Makers and allies from all five countries, and these provided the main theme of the discussion. Selected Change Makers from each country embark on the discussion, which was then taken up by the rest of the participants.

### 1. Role of Change Makers to promote the WE CAN Campaign

Change Makers shared their achievements, challenges, achievements and future plans. Most of the challenges are country, social status and sex specific but there are a few common trends. Young Change Makers from every country felt that their age and acceptance were challenged by the society, women Change Makers struggled within own family, while men felt challenged in their workplace, especially where they held high official positions. But all suffer from common problems including ideas that VAW is a private issue, and religious and traditional family values which discriminate against women. Therefore, Change Makers expressed their urge to continue the WE CAN

Campaign with a strong alliance and effective support. Participants reported that they feel now that they are the part of social movement which needs to continue.

## **2. Experiences of Domestic Violence Act - South Asian perspective**

Everybody agreed on the importance of this law. But its effectiveness in supporting survivors of violence is uncertain until and unless exists patriarchal societal structure, values, norms and practices change substantively.



Photo: workshop on domestic violence act

For example, marital rape is very common in South Asia but proving marital rape is undoubtedly hard within the current social context. Nepali Change Makers said their existing law prescribes punishment for marital rape but it is hard to implement. In India, Nepal and Pakistan, the law is helpful for women, if any violence survivor places any complaint it is treated as a case, but again existing family and social norms stop women from being proactive.

Participants suggested that the Domestic Violence Act can only be effective if societal attitudes can be changed and affirmative action by state mechanisms like police, judiciary and service delivery organisations are taken. In conclusion, the group agreed that Change Makers can play a vital role to make the Domestic Violence Act or similar laws effective, with their approach of mobilizing and sensitising people.

## **3. Role of Alliance in strengthening the WE CAN Campaign**

Change Makers from different countries shared their approaches on how they form and mobilise alliances from local to national level and their strength, limitations and challenges in promoting WE CAN. Simultaneously, they shared ways of dealing with domestic violence issues. A common trend emerged that Change Makers are much better at leading the campaign within her/his arena. But at community level they required support from other actors such as professional groups, local government, local elites and institutions. In Bangladesh, relevant actors are well acquainted and involved with alliances from local to district to national level. These include lawyers, teachers, journalists, *union parishad*, cultural groups and activists. In India, *Gram Panchayets* are closely integrated with Change Makers in many areas. As a result, social protection mechanisms are more visible and communities are becoming more sensitive in those areas both in Bangladesh and India. Participants of the workshops emphasised that relevant social actors and civil society participation are vital in building an effective alliance. At the same time, there should be an effective link/communication mechanism from village level Change Makers to district and national level alliances.

## **4. Role of institutions in preventing domestic violence**

All participants agreed that institutionalization of the campaign is a prerequisite in carrying the movement forward. Only institutional involvement will allow a greater integration of this campaign within a particular area, which the Change Makers alone will be unable to accomplish. Change Makers shared their experiences that the active involvement of a school, college, youth club, a *union parishad* or a professional group like a lawyer association or journalist group changed the whole scenario. Particularly, educational institutions like schools or colleges can be vital and effective vehicles in promoting campaign messages and themes in a sustainable manner. In addition, an affiliation with government education departments is important when mobilising educational institutions.