Magic Happens when Women Carry the RTI Torch

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Manusher Jonno Foundation

MRDI

THE CARTER CENTER

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INTRODUCTION

Access to information is a fundamental right and a powerful tool for citizens of a country to ensure access to their basic socio-economic and political rights. The vulnerable sections of any society can ensure social services reach them by effectively using their right to information. Women in particular - who often constitute the largest group of marginalized people in a society - can improve their position by exploiting the power of information. Even in countries with statutory rights to information, women are less likely to receive and access information, and Bangladesh is no exception.

Recognizing the inequities that women face, in 2015 the Carter Center in collaboration with the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) conducted a mixed-methods study in Bangladesh to assess whether women are able to exercise the right to information with the same ease, frequency and rate of success as men, and if not, what are the main obstacles facing women and what types of information are most critical to women for economic empowerment and the promotion and protection of rights. Conducted in six districts, the results showed that women in fact do not access information with the same facility as men. The Carter Center then used the results of that study to guide its programming design to improve women's access to information in Bangladesh. In August 2016, the Center, with support from USAID, and in partnership with MJF began a three-year program in Dhaka, Khagrachari and Sylhet to improve the enabling environment for women's right to information, build government capacity and support civil society organization to advance women's right of access to information. MRDI is one of the implementing partners of the program. Since the very beginning MRDI partnered with the Information Commission and Cabinet Division in the implementation process and engaged government bodies, civil society, business community and women's rights groups to ensure the program reaches as many people as possible.

The most visible result of the initiative has been the involvement of a contingent of young women from low income backgrounds,who, armed with the tools of Right to Information, managed to hold to account various government agencies responsible for delivering social services to citizens. In one and a half-year, they have used the RTI Act to change the way authorities view their responsibility towards citizens, and in the process, improve the quality of services delivered to their struggling neighbourhoods. These women dealt with high officials, faced hearings at the Information Commission and then spread the tools of RTI among others, through training their neighbors. They are the brave change makers of their communities.

As another part of the program, young women from various educational institutions in the country came together for a week-long bootcamp where they were empowered with the tools of right to information and its power to change their lives. These women have already started applying that knowledge not just to the benefit of their families and communities, but have also started to hold their own educational institutions accountable.

The initiative also produced a 12 episode radio programme with drama, music and interviews, which was broadcast over the national radio station Bangladesh Betar.

This presentation is a brief account of the initiative's journey with some specific cases of success.

Carrying the RTI torch forward

In December 2017, eight young women from two low income neighbourhoods in Dhaka received training on the use and benefits of the Right to Information Act in Bangladesh. In the two and a half years since, these women have filed RTI applications with different city authorities responsible for delivering various services to their localities. Together, they have managed to change the face of their neighbourhoods.

A BAREBONES EXISTENCE

Jhumur Rine, a second child placed in the middle of an older sister and younger brother, lives with her parents and siblings in Sanir Beel area inside Adabar. The Beel, which literally translates to marshland, is one among many low income neighbourhoods in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka. Rickshaw-pullers, domestic helps, day labourers, garment factory workers - people who serve as a lifeline to this sprawling megapolis - live in this densely populated neighbourhood in small corrugated iron-roof houses or two to three-storey buildings where a single three-room apartment is sometimes shared by as many as thirty people.

There is no clear accounting of how many people live in Sonir Beel. But Jhumur's family, and thousands like them, live day in-and-out in an environment riddled with mosquitoes, where community toilets are unhygienic and often run

without water, while stoves in common kitchens often run out of gas. The streets are dilapidated, sometimes run down to the point that any sign concrete had once existed there completely disappears. When it rains, the water enters the homes, while rickshaws and pedestrians on the streets often trip over and fall into open manholes or piles of garbage that city authorities feel no urge to remove.

Rine's father travels to work every morning in this environment at a hair salon in Gabtoli, an area further north, where he works as a barber. Despite living in trying circumstances and a very limited income, he has made sure all his children got an education. Jhumur's eldest sister graduated with a bachelor's degree this year, while she is half-way through her bachelor's degree. To pay for her education, she teaches at a school. Her younger brother, meanwhile, is in grade 10, preparing to sit for the national board exams - secondary school certificate -the results of which will determine which college, and later university, he is admitted to. Two years back, when Jhumur sat for the same exam, her father had to take out a loan from a local micro-credit organisation to pay the Tk. 8,000 her school charged by way of her registration fees.

Right before Jhumur sat for her exams she found that the actual fee the government charged was Tk. 2300 while the rest of the money was going to the school. Her school - was enlisted in the monthly pay order system - which meant that the government took care of the salaries of the teachers. Then why did the school need an extra Tk. 5,700 from the students? The question grated at her even two years after she had completed her studies.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO FIND OUT?

Jhumur was a little surprised by the question. It was December 2017, and she was attending the last day of a three-day training on Right to Information Act at the Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) offices. A middle-aged lady from her neighbourhood - Kulsom - had reached out to her and her friends Khaleda Akter, Beauty Akter and Sweety Akter - for a training 'that would teach them how to legally seek out information and how information can change their life and livelihood.' All four had agreed to come over as had Sweety's sister, Beauty Akter, and a number of others from another low income neighbourhood in Dhaka.

All eight of them spent the first day doing a lot of team bonding exercises and spent most of the second day finding out about this Act - the Right to Information - that gave them opportunity as ordinary citizens to seek and be entitled to receive the answer to questions relating to their rights and the services provided by the government - that impacted different aspects of their lives, their families and their neighbours. They studied not just the Act and the process involved, but also the risks involved and discussed how their families and neighbours would react to it if they were to file RTI requests.

On the final day, Jhumur and her fellow attendees - who would eventually become change makers - sat with their trainers to work out their first ever RTI application. They were asked to think of one thing they wanted to know for a long time that had to do with some form of service they had received from a public institution in Bangladesh. Her mind immediately jumped to the exorbitant amount her parents had to pay the School for her SSC exams.

"Can I really file an RTI to find out why they charged so much money?" Jhumur asked her trainer.

"Why not? It's a very valid question. Let's see what they have to say," responded her trainer.

Jhumur and her trainer then teamed up to draft Jhumur's first ever RTI application. She posed a set of questions directly addressing the head teacher of the school

a) If the School is an MPO-listed school, why does it need to charge Tk 8,000 instead of Tk 2,300 as mandated by the government?

b) If the teachers salaries are paid by the government, why are salaries held up by three to four months?

c) In addition to the high registration fees, the school also charges Tk 350 to Tk 500 as monthly tuition fees from students. How is this money utilised by the school?

d) What is the annual revenue, expenditure and budget of her School?

THE CHANGEMAKERS

Jhumur emerged out of that three-day training having filed one more RTI application - she asked the city corporation of Dhaka North how much they had earned from issuing birth certificates? What was the legal recourse and disciplinary steps taken if someone is overcharged for a birth certificate? She also asked the city corporation for a

copy of any order that might have been issued after an executive meeting of the corporation to increase the fees, including the copy of the meeting minutes of that session.

By June 2019, two and a half years since her training, Jhumur has filed a staggering 12 RTI applications and is in the process of filing five more. Her friends Khaleda Akter and Sweety Akter, not to be left behind, filed six and eight applications respectively. Beauty Akter filed four more applications.

Together, the four girls from Sonir Beel area managed to file 30 applications, asking the government authorities to respond to them on why the streets in their neighbourhood were not being cleaned and repaired regularly, on why their kitchens were not getting adequate gas supply, on why the local hospital was charging them for medicines they were entitled to receive for free, on why city officials were not spraying their neighbourhood with insecticide to reduce the scourge of mosquitoes.

At another end of the city, another set of young women who were also in attendance in that three-day training at MRDI - Fatema Akter, Jhorna, Rojina Howlader and Rabia Khatun - decided give their neighbourhood Dakkhin Goran in Khilgaon a make over. Together the girls filed an astonishing 38 RTI applications, asking the authorities about the culvert in their neighbourhood that had turned into a death trap

on unauthorized constructions in their neighbourhood, on the fees they were paying for different services, on their safety when they plied public transportation etc.

All applications, however, were spearheaded by the girls themselves, with MRDI only serving as a facilitator. Not a single idea for RTI application was generated by MRDI and never had any of MRDI's staff visited the neighbourhoods in question, and very rarely spoke to the authorities or served applications themselves. And when they did, it mostly had to do with concerns over security of the girls. But the girls and MRDI continue to meet at regular intervals to discuss progress on different applications and file new ones.

These women are now change makers in their communities. They not only continue to file RTIs themselves, but go door-to-door in their communities spreading the word of RTI and its potential to change their lives. The girls have also established a peer group in their communities who help them spread their message further. For their work, they receive a nominal Tk. 1,000, which barely covers any expense beside facilitating their communication with MRDI.

"I realised from the training during those three days that people like us, from low income families, were being denied our rights." says Jhumur. "I felt if we somehow managed to do something about it, then we might get them back."

"And through us people would know about it. And then they could fight for their rights as well."

EMPOWERING SOCIETY THROUGH WOMEN

The Right to Information is globally accepted as one of the most effective tools to ensure transparency and curb corruption. After years of struggle by rights groups and activists, the government of Bangladesh passed the Right to Information Act in Parliament in 2009.

The right to information is a vital component for ensuring freedom of thought, conscience and speech, as guaranteed in the Bangladesh constitution. The RTI Act is aimed at ensuring free flow of information and the people's right to information.

"Every citizen shall have the right to information from the authority, and the authority shall, on demand from a citizen, be bound to provide him with the information," reads the 2009 Act.

Ensuring right to information is necessary for the empowerment of the people.

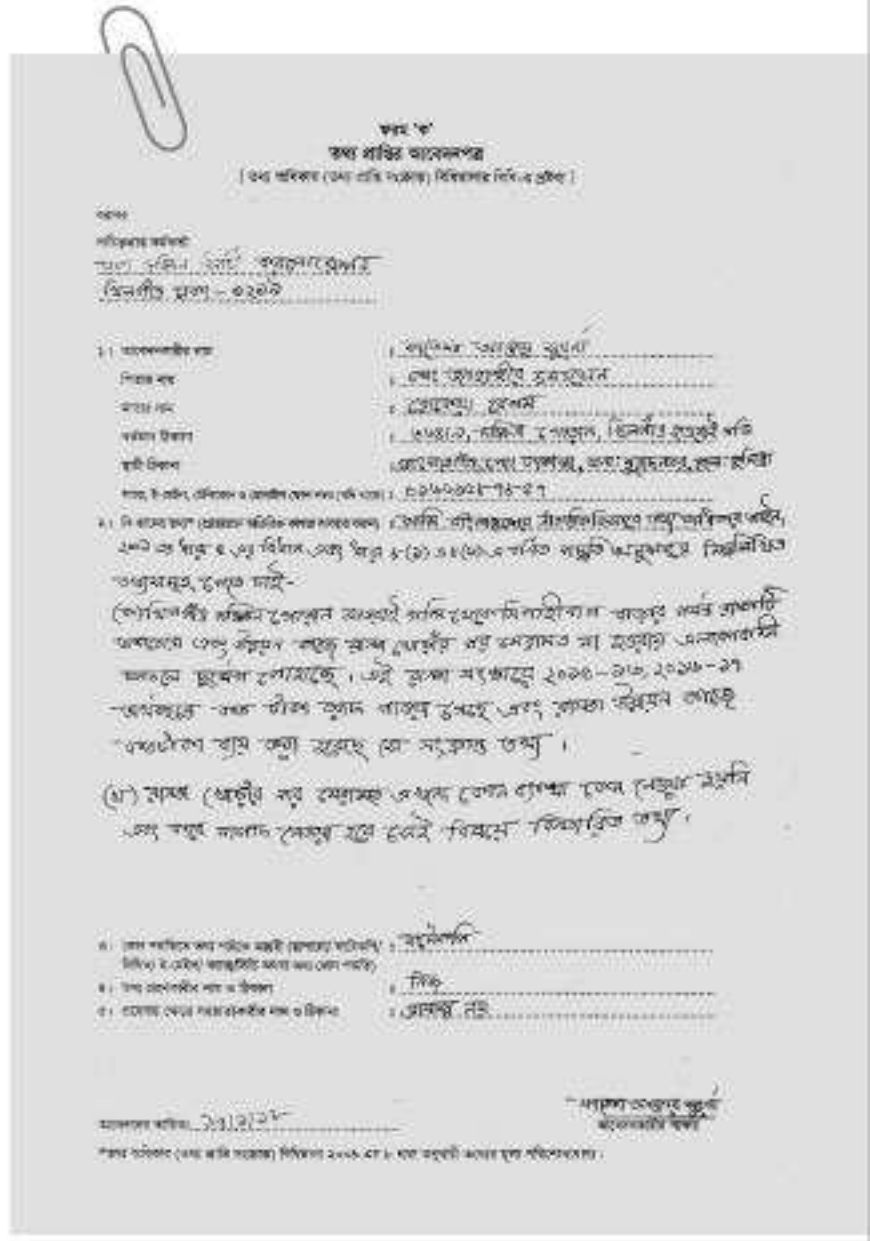
The preamble of the Act states: "... if the right to information of the people is ensured, the transparency and accountability of all public, autonomous and statutory organisations and of other private institutions constituted or run by government or foreign financing shall increase, corruption of the same shall decrease and good governance of the same shall be established."

Even though the document contains many such lofty declarations and the government further pledged to advance the right of access to information in the Poverty Reduction Strategy, there is widespread consensus that the implementation of the Act, even after 10 years, has been slow, and large sections of the population remain unaware of its potential.

One effective way to amend the situation, as evidenced by the role played by Jhumur and her peers, would be to empower more and more women with the ability to effectively use RTIs.

With this in mind, Manusher Jonno Foundation teamed with The Carter Center to advance a meaningful right of access to information for women. MRDI, as a partner of MJF, introduced a number of interventions that would help empower women with the tools of RTI, including engaging stakeholders at different tiers in interactions, community meetings and campaigns over media and at the level of the community.

The change makers - the eight girls from the two low income neighbourhoods in Dhaka - are a major, albeit only one part, of the larger programme. Not only does the program interact with women from urban slums, but woman entreprenuers, women employed, students, NGOs working on issues of women and information



sector, schoolgirls, have all been engaged through various initiatives that help them understand and deploy the tools of RTI. Additionally, the program employs video communication, radio programs and even leaflets, to spread the word on the power of right of access to information in empowering women and the society at large.

LESSONS TO REMEMBER

The headmaster at first ignored the RTI filed by Jhumur asking for details why students were being overcharged for their exam registration and what the money was being spent for. When she met him in person, he told her she had no right to question the person who had taught her.

After a few months, Rine filed the same application with the chairman of the school. Still, there was no response.

"One day when I went to give private lessons to a child who lived not far from the school, a number of people showed up. They included security guards from the school, their sons and a number of other people."

They tried to convince her to withdraw her application

"They told me: 'He taught you everything you know and now you are filing an RTI against him?' A crowd had gathered around the house. The locals had to intervene to contain the situation," remembers Jhumur.

Finally, after months, the application ended up at a hearing with the Information Commission. This time, as soon as both parties received the letters, he invited Jhumur over to speak to him.

"He was far more reasonable this time and tried to politely convince me to withdraw my application," says Rine. He even reached out to Sweety and Khaleda asking them to convince Rine to withdraw the application.

But Rine held firm. "I explained to him nicely that since the complaint has already been filed, it's best that he responded."

Finally, at the Information Commission hearing, he told Rine that she should tell the Commission that she has already been provided the information. "I will only do that if you promise that you will provide the information."

The headmaster pledged in writing that he would provide Rine with the information by the following week. She then told the commission that she had already received the information so he could avoid disciplinary consequences.

A week later the headmaster sat Rine down and gave her a breakdown of school's expenses. he explained most of the high tuition and registration fee were spent on the new building they were constructing for the school.

Rine however is not fully convinced.

"When we were students he used to come to school on a rickshaw. Now he comes on a bike or a microbus. Some people wonder if some of the money has reached his own pockets."

Still, her RTI seems to have had a positive impact.

"The registration fees have now come down . Also, in general, he seems to have become more attentive to students' needs.

REMOVING THE DEATH TRAPS

Dakkhin Goran in Khilgaon, where Fatema Akter Suborna resides, is not much different from Sanir Beel in terms of demography and density. Thousands of families live in tin huts or two to three-storey apartments, and one building can sometimes hold as much as 100 people. The roads are worn out and almost never cleaned, mosquitoes are a menace, household waste is almost never cleared out, gas supply is intermittent.

What makes life worse for Suborna and her neighbours is a culvert - an open drain that runs along the main thoroughfare in their neighbourhood. Usually, a bridge is built on top of culverts for people to walk through, but at Dakkhin Goran, residents have been hearing about a bridge for years with no construction in sight. During monsoon, the streets, already run over by waste, disappear under water and pedestrians and vehicles can no

longer distinguish between the street and the culvert.

"Rickshaws and pedestrians often fall in the dirty water," says Suborna. "Every few days you hear of children who have fallen in the water. An adult has to usually drop down and rescue the kids. But even that is difficult as there is nothing to hold on to."

"If there is no one to see the children fall, they sometimes even drown."

Around the same time Jhumur filed an application with her local school, Suborna, at the end of her three day training, put her mind to doing something about the culvert. She filed an application with Dhaka South City Corporation asking them whether the authorities had any plans to fix the culvert that ran from Tilpapara to Basabo Chhayabithi? When they planned to do it? How much money had been allocated for it? And if there aren't any plans to fix it, then why?

Her first application, filed in February last year, predictably went unanswered. During one of the many follow-up meetings with MRDI, she drafted an appeal and this time addressed her queries to the Chief Executive Officer of Dhaka South City Corporation in April. Once again, there was no response.

About six months from the time she had first filed her RTI, she finally filed a complaint to the Information Commission. The Commission set a date and sent her a letter to attend the hearing.

"A city corporation official showed up at the hearing. He told the commissioner that they had written back to me but the post office had failed to locate my address."

Suborna would later find out that 'failure to locate address' was a fairly common plea from defendants at a Commission hearing. Although sometimes it served as an excuse, in some instances - because of the inefficiency of local post offices - it turned out to be the real reason.

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Suborna finally got her answer after the hearing. Unfortunately for her, the city corporation did not have either a plan or the funds to cover up the culvert. But on the bright side they told her that moved by the concerns raised by her at the hearing, they would build a road adjacent to the culvert.

The city corporation followed up on its promise and built a road in the Chhayabithi area as an alternative to the culvert. In subsequent months, they would repair other roads in and around the culvert, providing locals with a belated sigh of relief.

It was Suborna's first RTI application and emboldened by this success, she decided to take on bigger issues in her next endeavor - the treatment of patients at the general hospital at Mugda. Suborna had first gone to the hospital in October 2017 when her sister-in-law was giving birth to a daughter. The 500-bed, 13-storey facility had opened up only in 2013, with a medical college to go with it. What she saw at the hospital had left her terrified.

"There were either no nurses in sight or they simply sat around doing nothing. Meanwhile, the cleaners were working as nurses - injecting patients or inserting canola in patient's veins," she remembers.

As a state-run hospital, Mugda should have been providing patients medicine for free. Unfortunately, besides a few pain killers, most patients, including Suborna's sister-in-law, were being forced to buy expensive medicines from outside the hospital.

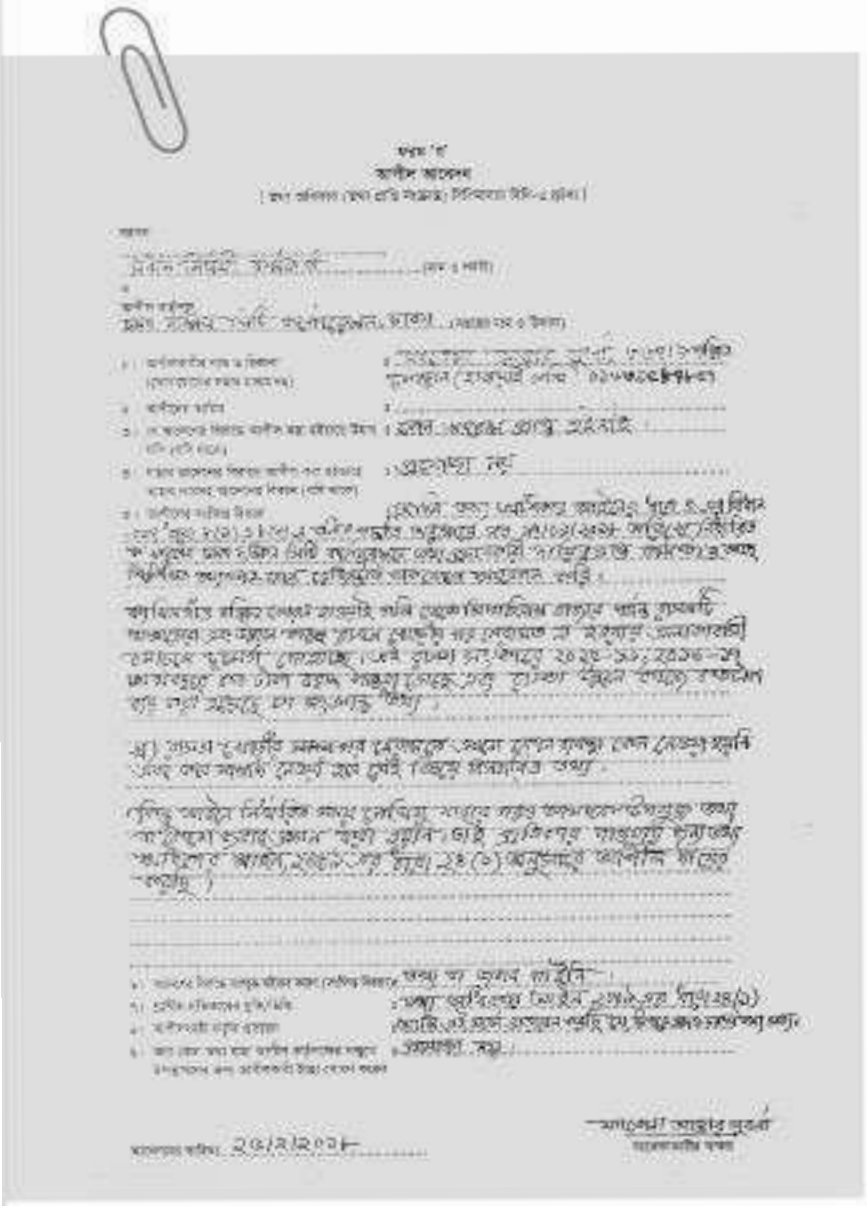
"They had all the testing facilities but we were hold to do the tests outside," she says. They even specified which private facilities we should do our tests in."

So Suborna sent out her questions to the hospital - why is the hospital not providing medicines? How much money is allocated for medicines? How much does the government give to the hospital for the free medicines? How many doctors and how many nurses does the hospital have?

She would have to wait a few months, file an appeal with the higher authority, then submit a complaint to the information commission, before she got her answer.

"I got a call from the hospital one day and they told me they couldn't find my house. They finally located my house through a girl who worked at the hospital and lived in our neighbourhood," says Suborna.

When a man from the hospital arrived in her house, her mother-in-law at first was worried Suborna was in trouble. But the



man from the hospital explained to her mother-in-law that Suborna was doing a service for a lot of people by filing the RTI application.

Suborna received detailed answers on how much money the hospital received for free medicines, what sort of testing facilities it had and a breakdown of the numbers of doctors and nurses.

Unfortunately for her, the hospital explained the reason they failed to give free medicines was because the government was not providing it to them.

Although Suborna did not get exactly the answer she expected, it turned out her RTI application had done a whole lot of good.

"The next time I went there I saw that they had put out a chart on every floor detailing what medicines and tests were available for free and a whole host of information that she had first solicited from the hospital. "They were no longer telling people to do their tests outside," she says.

WORKING WITHIN LIMITATIONS

Beauty Akter is a few years younger than her fellow change makers from the Sonir Beel area. She lives with a family of five—her sister Sweety, a brother and her parents - and studies at the Dhaka Udyan School where she is preparing to sit for the secondary school certificate exams. To supplement her income she runs a tailoring business from home.

At the end of her three-day training in December 2017, when her neighbours decided to address problems to do with the infrastructure and services in their area, Beauty decided to file her RTI on an issue which was fairly innocuous.

"From my bedroom window I would often see young children smoke cigarettes and possibly ganja," says Beauty.

"Sometimes I would even see them buy and sell contraband items." Beauty wanted to ask the local police station what they were doing about cleaning up their neighbourhood from the dangers of drugs, what would happen in the future to these young school children, how they could be saved from drugs and what the law enforcers were doing about this.

Her trainers at MRDI sensed from the beginning that the issue Beauty picked was anything but innocuous. From experience of having dealt with many situations like these, they knew dealing in drugs was not restricted to cigarettes and ganja, and most likely involved amphetamines known as yaba tablets, and possibly even heroin.

They knew that such trade in any neighbourhood would not be restricted to school children, and was probably run by an organised gang that had layers of operations, involving.

Unlike other RTIs filed by the change makers, MRDI took on a far more active role in Beauty's application, trying to take every precaution for her safety and security.

"MRDI drafted my application and filed it with the local police station themselves, in my name" remembers Beauty.

MRDI was not wrong in taking precautions.

"A week often the applications were filed, I noticed the school boys, whom I had never actually met in person, started making snide remarks whenever I crossed paths with them on my way to school and back," says Beauty.

"I did not make anything of it the first two days. But when it did not stop I realised where this was coming from," she says.

When the comments turned to direct threats, Beauty informed MRDI officials of what was going on. They jumped to action right away.

"We realised that somehow drugs gangs come to know that Beauty had filed the application," says Hasibur Rahman, executive director of MRDI.

"We took the issue to the top brass of the police. While the police superiors were eager to address the problem, we actually discouraged them to push the issue any further, worried about Beauty's safety."

From my bedroom window I would often see young children smoke cigarettes and possibly ganja.

Hasibur and his colleagues at MRDI knew that even if the local police address the threats Beauty was facing, she would always be in danger because of the number of people involved in the drug trade.

"We immediately stopped the process to ensure that Beauty did not face any harassment," says Hasibur.

Beauty, realised from then on she would have to start smaller. And so she decided to do something about the menace of mosquitoes in her neighbourhood.

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"Our neighbourhood is infested with mosquitoes. I filed an application asking the authorities what they were doing to rid our neighbourhood of mosquitoes."

The authorities were prompt in responding to beauty's application.

"They sent me a detailed list of names, areas, dates, times, types of insecticides that were being used by the corporation to rid our neighbourhood of mosquitoes. The problem though was none of us actually saw anybody arrive in our neighbourhood. The document, however, stated - with names of individuals - that it was being deployed thrice a week - Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays."

Beauty raised the issue with MRDI, who reached out to the city corporation and let them know of the realities of the ground.

"This time I saw one city corporation employee arrive. However, on most days, they don't spray our neighbourhood."

FIGHTING THE MOSQUITO MENACE

A resident of Hawai Goli in Dakkhin Goran, Jhorna moved the Dhaka South City Corporation in December last year seeking information on whether the city corporation had plans to spray medicine in her neighbourhood, Dakkhin Goran.

She also wanted to know the city corporation's policy and plan to spray mosquito medicine and how many times it sprayed medicines between July and October 2018.

A housewife and mother of a school-going daughter, Jhorna lived with her in-laws and thought better of informing them

details about the task she had undertaken. Her husband works as a decorator for offices.

Her first application, went unheeded. And then she filed an appeal.

"One day I returned home after my daughter had finished school and found my mother-in-law in a state of anguish. Four to five men from the city corporation had come to our house looking for me."

The city officials had apparently told her mother-in-law that Jhorna had filed a case against them. Naturally, her mother-in-law got very worried.

In the evening, two of the city officials returned to her house again.

"They tried to tell me that they gave medicines regularly. When I argued that I never see them or hear their machines, they told me they came early morning, around Fazr hours," says Jhorna. When Jhorna pointed out she never saw any residual smoke from the sprayed medicine, they argued they provided liquid medicine.

They would return again the next day. This time they tried to make Jhorna sign a piece of document with the city offices seal, in which, presumably, she was either withdrawing her application or stating that she had received satisfactory answers.

"At first they tried to scold me. And then they changed their tune and became apologetic. Said I had landed them in a lot of trouble. They promised to spray my house regularly."

But Jhorna was not satisfied with that. She made them pledge they would spray the entire area.

Buoyed by her success with the mosquito application, she then filed an application over the authorities' failure to clear out household waste. More often than not, household waste would rot in front of homes for days as the city corporation cleaner failed to take it away.

"One day I confronted the city corporation cleaner and he turned out to be nice boy. He clearly explained to me that the communal waste bin - from where the city corporation vehicles collect the waste - was so far away that it was

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impossible for him to gather the individual household waste and dump it there. Moreover, that bin was always full, which is why he could only collect new waste once the older one had been cleared out."

And so Jhorna teamed up with her mentors at MRDI and filed an RTI with the city officials asking them what they were going to do about it. Months later, her request ended up as a complaint with the Information Commission.

"City corporation officials showed up at the hearing and promised to do something about it if my allegation checked out."

And they did. Not long after the hearing, the city corporation set up two new waste disposal units at Dakkhin Goran which has since allowed the cleaners to clear out daily waste, on a daily basis.

For Jhorna, the experience of filing RTIs has been a mixed bag. In some instances, for example when she applied with the gas supply authorities asking them why gas supply was short and irregular, two men visited her and explained to her that there was now a national crisis in gas supply which would be resolved after the government imported gas from international sources. But often, she has faced resistance.

FIGHTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Eve-teasing is a rather inappropriate - yet popularly used term - to describe the different forms of sexual harassment that women face in public places in Bangladesh. Reports of harassment and violence against women are commonplace, and even stricter laws introduced at the turn of the century have done little to stem this tide. Given this context, it took an astounding amount of courage for Rabia Khatun Shorna to do what she did.

Shorna by all means has been a prolific change maker. So far she has filed 19 RTI applications on issues ranging from availability of and safety in public transports, the state of her local library, relocation of floating population, on what the Bangladesh Standard testing Institute (BSTI) is doing to quality the standards in packaged food items of Pran products, the state of roads and waste disposal in her neighbourhood, what steps the authorities are taking to reduce road accidents, the absence of traffic police on tempo stands, the availability of special passes on public transportation, citizens charter for second generation and

Men not only ogle but will often make indecent offers or comment on our body. Even worse, they will shove you in different directions. Sometimes, in a crowded bus, you will find a hand trying to touch you inappropriately and it is often difficult to even identify in that crowd who exactly is doing that

manhole covers in her neighbourhood.

For Shorna, however, her biggest struggle was to deal with the barrage of inappropriate behaviour that she faced everyday on public transportation.

"Men not only ogle but will often make indecent offers or comment on our body. Even worse, they will shove you in different directions. Sometimes, in a crowded bus, you will find a hand trying to touch you inappropriately and it is often difficult to even identify in that crowd who exactly is doing that," says Shorna.

In many ways, the more troubling aspect to this is that almost no one will ever speak up in defense of women like Shorna who often travel alone. With numerous reports in the national media about the murder of people who called out harassers, there is now a culture of silence in Bangladesh when it comes to speaking up against harassment. And so Shorna decided to take the issue to the authorities. She filed an RTI application with Khilgaon Police Station. When the law enforcers did not respond to her application.

She filed another application with the women and children's affairs ministry. She asked them what they were doing to protect women in public transportation, especially given that the general welfare of women falls under their purview.

When the ministry did not respond, she filed a complaint. She is yet to receive any letter from the Information Commission regarding a hearing.

Meanwhile, unsatisfied with sitting around for the Commission to call her, she filed another application on the same issue, this time with the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority - the government organisation running the public bus service. She not only asked them what they were doing about sexual harassment on public transportation, but how many complaints they had received so far and what they had done to address them.

This time she got an answer.

"They told me they did not have any statistics on the numbers of complaints filed, because no one actually ever complained about it," says Shorna. "When I think about it, I guess they are telling the truth. Even though harassment is rampant, women would be too scared to make a formal complaint about it."

"They however told me BRTA drivers were trained to handle such situations. Unfortunately, I've never seen any sign of that."

Persistence has been one of Shorna's endearing qualities from the start. She is not simply satisfied by filing an application with the authorities and waiting for an answer, but she takes every possible step along the way to ensure that the malaise she had identified in the RTI is addressed.

One of Shorna's early RTI's was on the absence of covers on manholes on the streets in Dakkhin Goran. Manhole covers were either broken or missing and sewage would spill on to the streets during rain. Often, rickshaws would trip over them.

"When I went to file an application on manhole covers with the south city corporation, I could not find their information officer. I was sent from one room to another, but no one would take responsibility for accepting my RTI application. So I went back to MRDI and filed a complaint against the absence of Information Officer at the city corporation."

Not soon after, Shorna discovered that the manhole covers on her streets had not only been repaired but had been elevated by a few inches so that rickshaws no longer tripped over them.

THE RIGHT TO TRAVEL

With a high enrolment rate and free primary education, as well as a successful grassroots NGO movement that has contributed to employment of women and ensuring their rights, women in Bangladesh fare much better economically than in a lot of similar developing countries.

Add to that, Bangladesh's export industry - which is singlehandedly led by readymade garments industries - and whose lion's share of employees are women, Bangladesh finds itself in a unique position among developing countries in terms of the participation of women in public arenas.

But this has also has its downsides. Sexual harassment is one side of the story, and the change makers, as pointed out earlier, are doing everything in

their capacity to take it on. But the other aspect to it, is in many ways simpler - as women need to travel by themselves more and more, it is simply impossible to find adequate seats in public transports.

Khaleda has to travel everyday on public buses to go to and return from the Dhaka Polytechnic College, where she is studying for a diploma in mechanical engineering.

"I am often refused entry on the bus, saying there are no seats. I know there are seats reserved for women, but when I point that out to them, they say that women block up the space for at least four men since men are far more willing to travel without taking up a seat."

Khaleda decided to file an application ensure her right to travel on buses. She filed an application not just with BRTA, but BRTC - Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation - as well, asking them how many seats are kept in reserve not just for women, but how many seats are reserved in general.

After filing a number of complaints and appeals, she finally got her answer. "I discovered these buses apparently have at least 15 seats reserved, including nine for women, and two for people with physical disabilities."

In the days following her application, Khaleda noticed that bus conductors had become far more vigilant in securing the seats reserved for women.

"In the first few days I saw the conductors asking men to get up from seats reserved for women. But finding a seat is just one aspect of her struggle to travel on public buses. The other one is to find a bus itself.

"I recently filed another application with BRTC asking them how many buses they have on the Farm Gate to Gabtoli route. I often have to spend a half hour to an hour waiting for a bus and find myself running late for classes."

The application was filed recently, and she is still waiting to hear back from them.

In the meantime, Khaleda took it upon herself to file an application on another issue that has been plaguing citizens in recent years, although no one has been willing to do much about it.

With modernisation and digitisation of services, Bangladeshi citizens are now almost always required to submit documents such as the National ID, national exam certificates etc to avail different services or apply for jobs, or admission to different institutions. Unfortunately, given the sheer size of Bangladesh's population the task on the part of authorities

to issue such documents becomes massive, and they end up making a lot of errors in them.

"For every error they make, we are made to pay for the corrections," says Khaleda. "This basically also opens up a window for corruption as they are then almost inclined to make an error on purpose, to either harass us or overcharge us."

In November last year, she filed an RTI with the Technical Exam Board on what exactly is the process for rectification of mistakes that are made on exmination results and certificates. In April this year, she made a similar application with the National Election Commission for errors in national IDs.

THE HEALTH OF HEALTHCARE

Rojina Howlader lives in Hawai Goli, not far from where Jhorna lives, in a family of seven - her two sisters, two brothers and her parents. Many years before she had received the RTI training at MRDI, she had taken her grandmother to the reputed ICDDR,B hospital in Dhaka - a medical research institution in Bangladesh of global renown.

"I had taken my grandmother there because she was vomiting. I found patients were neglected there. My grandmother had gotten worse in the few nights we spent at the hospital," remembers Rojina.

In January last year, Rojina sought information from the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) about the services it provides, its capacity to attend to patients.

She requested a list of patients admitted to icddr,b in the 2015-16 and 2016-17 financial years, how many patients had died because of negligence, and whether action had been taken for negligence of duty.

Her first application was not answered. She filed a complaint when she did not receive any reply from icddr,b. She let MRDI know that she had not received a response.

One fine day, Rojina discovered she had been served a legal notice for filing the RTI application.

I had taken my grandmother there because she was vomiting. I found patients were neglected there. My grandmother had gotten worse in the few nights we spent at the hospital.

"I received a letter on an official icddr,b letterhead signed by their legal manager. Apparently they had responded to my queries but did not find anyone at the address I provided in my RTI application."

Both parties ended up at the Information Commission for a hearing in September last year. It turned out that icddr,b had indeed struggled to locate her.

At the hearing, the Information Commission ordered icddr,b to provide the applicant the information she was seeking once again.

In its reply, the icddr,b listed 12 types of services that it provides.

The answer to Rojina's complaint also revealed that the hospital had 59 doctors and 106 nurses and that icddr,b planned to hire more staff to better serve the patients. It also listed a number of senior posts and explained their roles.

During 2015-1017, the icddr,b terminated or dismissed eight staff.

"The commission however told iccdr'b that they were not required to provide me with a list of people who had died in their care." she said.

AN EXAMPLE FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

The last one and a half years has been nothing short of a journey for the change makers. They have had to deal with powerful authorities and face different roadblocks, in the effort to secure information, to these trail-blazing girls.

But in the end, they prevailed.

The upside of all their effort has been that things are starting to change - albeit incrementally.

The streets are cleaner. Mud roads have been converted to concrete streets. When people from the two neighbourhoods walk into public facilities such as hospitals, sometimes there are signs indicating the services that are available to them, sometimes the people walking in already know their rights.

"What we did with most of the answers we got from the authorities was to deploy various methods to disseminate the information that had been made available to us. We printed them and pasted them on walls around the neighbourhood. We went door-to-door telling people about their rights," says Shorna.

The girls now not only continue to file RTI application, but are now inspiring more people in their group. Last year, allies of the change makers from their neighbourhoods filed applications on irregularities in payouts for old age allowance, maintenance of local playground, child support payments, as well what the government authorities were doing to control the price of essential goods.

In the meantime they continue their mission - filing more and more RTIs with the city corporations, Titas Gas supply authorities, BRTA, the election commission etc. Along the way they have also filed RTIs with non-governmental authorities such as the BRAC - the world's largest NGO, and have even become aware of their rights with regards to the private sector, especially when it comes to the food they are consuming.

We have really been surprised by their enthusiasm, courage and zeal. On most occasions, we have to hold them back from taking on authorities who might cause trouble in their personal lives.

"We have really been surprised by their enthusiasm, courage and zeal," says Hasibur. "On most occasions, we have to hold them back from taking on authorities who might cause trouble in their personal lives,' he says.

"For us, its their safety that comes first. We tell them first think of your life, then your career, and only then, think of information."

The Power of Information to Fix Education

Over the last few months authorities at some of the top education institutions in the country - specifically the University of Dhaka and Jahangirnagar University - have been surprised by a flurry of requests from female students asking them for detailed information on how the administrations of the schools function.

At Dhaka University, students have asked authorities on the rules and charges for residential and non-residential students attached to different halls, on how teachers are appointed, on the office hours and lunch break of employees at the university, on the fees realized for marksheet and ID, etc.

People who have studied at the university down the years will understand the value of the questions asked. For years, the administration has frustrated students with irregular and inconsistent fees, they can almost never be found at their desks.

In recent years, the university has opened up a special evening courses section where admission requirements have been eased in return for high, yet random, tuition fees. For regular students, evening courses have been a thorn on their side as they feel evening course students are given more priority because they pay more.

Last month, the university received an RTI request from one of their female students, Jannatun Tagrin Mohsina, who wanted to know from the authorities how much money the university had earned from evening courses between January 2018 to March 2019.

What the authorities don't know is that Mohsina was among 42 other female students who signed up and attended a three-day bootcamp hosted by MRDI in March this year where she was empowered with the tools of RTI and its potential to change her life.

"We went through three-days of intensive training where we discussed the value of information in our life and how information can change our life," says Mohsina. "We found out what the Right to Information Act was, how it can be used, and heard about stories of how RTI was already changing lives."

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The stories Mohsina heard were narrated by the change makers, a group of girls living in slums of Dhaka who attended a 3 days RTI training in December 2017 and have since filed a series of RTI applications that took various city authorities to task, and which have changed the face of their neighbouhoods. Alongside them were three project staff from MRDI who essentially served as trainers to the girls.

"The camps were not just all about serious things. We had live musical performances, training on theatre and a barbecue," remembers Afra Nawmi, another participant of the camp.

The Bootcamp brought together an eclectic mix of female students from educational organisations all around, including five girls of indigenous communities background from the hilly district of Khagrachhari.

Instead of harping on corruption we impressed up the girls the power of RTI to change their lives

"Instead of harping on corruption we impressed up the girls the power of RTI to change their lives," says Hasibur Rahman, the executive director of MRDI. The girls appear to have been drawn to that message like a fish drawn to water.

At the start of the Bootcamp the 42 girls were broken down into four groups through random selection and pitted against each other to make their learning and exercises more vibrant. They went through a pre-assessment and post-assessment of their understanding of RTI at the start and conclusion of the camp. The girls also left the camp with a work plan that included not just a list of RTI application they will file, but steps they can take to spread the words on the benefits of RTI.

Since then the girls have been unstoppable

Jahangirnagar University students have so far already filed eight applications asking authorities about the absence of designated officers on campus, even though nearly ten years have passed since the RTI Act became effective, making it compulsory for all public institutions to have an designated officer. They have asked the authorities about the legality of the fees charged for marksheets and certificates. They also asked authorities about the behavioral code of conduct for teachers and employees - an extremely pertinent question for current and former students who have been at the wrong end of unacceptable and indecent behavior fairly regularly.

But the girls have also stepped out of their schools as well. Nawmi filed an application with the education ministry asking them about the rules for leave and holidays of public educational institution teachers. They have filed applications with the road transport authorities on the fares charged on public buses that they often use to travel to and return from college. They have asked authorities about the maintenance of public toilets, on heavy vehicles plying small streets, on the rules for distribution of old age and widow allowances, on the availability of playgrounds for physically challenged children, on mistakes in national IDs and why citizens are made to pay for mistakes of officials, and the rules under which private universities set their admissions and tuition fees.

The participation of the girls from Khagrachhari added a further dimension to the Bootcamp. The indigenous communities in Bangladesh living in Khagrachhari and its two neighbouring districts of Rangamati and Bandarban have been struggling for years to preserve their rights over their indigenous culture and land against the majority Bengalis. Now, after the camp, the girls know how to claim their rights by applying the RTI Act. They do not have to beat in the bush. They know the value of information in protecting rights and also know the official procedure of claiming information from authorities. This is an area of empowerment that will effectively contribute to make changes in the life and livelihood of the indigenous communities if applied properly.

Since the end of the bootcamp, the girls have been meeting their MRDI mentors over study circles where they plan different applications and discuss the progress in the ones already filed.

SPREADING THE WORD OF RTI THROUGH ART

The story opens with Ranu, a young school-going girl studying about the Right to Information at School. As she reads out a section about the rights accorded to citizens by the law, she is called out of the classroom by her mother Hafiza. Her father has fallen seriously ill, and Ranu must help Hafiza take him to the hospital. At the hospital, Ranu and Hafiza are handed a long list of medicines and tests that they must do. The doctor also tells them that the follow-up visit must take place at his private clinic.

We enter scene three of the play, aired in Bangladesh Radio between December 2018 to January 2019, where Hafiza is telling Ranu she can longer carry on with her education and must find work as her father is unwell and she needs to support

the family because of rising medical expenses. She runs crying to her school teacher who reminds her what she has learnt about RTI Act from her schoolbook.

The solution to your worries is in your school textbook.

Ranu's family is basically suffering because they are being forced to pay expensive medical bills, which, as citizens of Bangladesh, they should not have to. By filing an RTI application with the local health centre on why Ranu's father is not getting free medicines and why they are being forced to test and follow-up at a private facility, she is able to address the problem and is no longer forced to quit her education.

Thus goes the first two episodes of "My Information, My Right" - a 12-episode radio drama created by MRDI in partnership with the Information Commission and Cabinet Division of the government of Bangladesh to increase awareness on the right to information in the country. In the following episodes, a now empowered Ranu goes about helping others in her locality file RTI application so that they secure the services provided by the government. The entire show, however, not just contained a drama, but also music set to the tune of folk songs, with the lyrics expounding the virtues of RTI, interviews of people closely associated with raising awareness on RTI, as well as quizzes towards the end of each show that draw on the participation of listeners. The Chief Information Commissioner, the Secretary Coordination and Reforms of the Cabinet Division, other current and former commissioners, executives of project implementing agencies MRDI, The Carter Center and Manusher Jonno Foundation, but most importantly, change makers

who have successfully filed RTI application till now, are among those interviewed in each episode of the show.

In the end, through SMS, Facebook and email, nearly 4,400 people participated in the RTI quizzes and MRDI later handed over prizes to the winners.

First of its kind in Bangladesh, the entertaining radio drama on RTI "My Information, My Right", produced and broadcast in partnership with Bangladesh Betar, could attract huge numbers of audience. Though the project's target area was Dhaka city and the surrounding areas, response to quizzes show that listeners all over the country tuned the programme. It went on air through commercial service at an hour convenient to the listeners. The issue, story line of the drama and quality of production attracted listeners who received some useful information in an entertaining way.

Such was the success of the radio show that Bangladesh Betar has now co-opted the product and is planning to run the entire show at all stations around the country to spread awareness on right to information. Bangladesh Betar Sylhet has already started its airing.

"From the very beginning we made sure that it was not just independent agencies creating a show, but an inclusive project that involved every stakeholder, including the government and information commission. That strategy has cleared paid off judging by the Commission's interest in reusing the shows"

-- says Hasibur.

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