

Women's Voice and Leadership (WVL) Bangladesh

Final Evaluation Report



Canada 

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Project

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PREFACE

For the past twenty-two years, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) has been striving to ensure the well-being of marginalized people in Bangladesh and promote human rights, good governance, and gender equality through a rights-based approach. Manusher Jonno Foundation employs numerous strategies and initiatives, including advocacy, networking, campaigns, capacity building, research, and program development, to influence national policymakers and reform laws and policies to establish human rights and a society based on equality and justice. MJF target groups include vulnerable women, children, persons with disabilities, landless people, sex workers, Indigenous, Dalit-Harijan, Hijra, and Transgender communities.

The Women's Voice and Leadership - Bangladesh (WVL-B) Project is implemented by the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) with support from Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and is aligned with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) and has had a profound impact so far. From 2019 to 2024, the project succeeded in empowering marginalized women and girls by enhancing the capacities of local Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) to promote gender equality. The project provided grants and capacity-building to 16 WROs working with marginalized groups, including violence survivors, ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, Dalits, migrant workers, sex workers, rural poor women, and transgender individuals.

The end-line evaluation commissioned by MJF was a crucial step in the WVLB project's journey. The objective of the comprehensive assessment was to evaluate the project's success, understand the contextual factors that influenced its outcomes, and identify valuable lessons for future projects. The evaluation focused on the project's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability, underscoring our commitment to continuous improvement and learning.

The WVL-B project is a symbol of hope for local-level WROs, who struggle every day with innumerable challenges to ensure gender equality and build a world free from exploitation and discrimination.

Shaheen Anam

Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation

List of Abbreviations

AKS	Ananya Kallayan Sangathon
BOMSA	Bangladeshi Ovibashi Mohila Sramik Association
CBOs	Community Based Organisations
CWCS	The Centre for Women and Children Studies
CWFD	Concerned Women for Family Development
DAHS	Dener Alo Hijra Songho
DEF	Dalit Empowerment Foundation
FGD	Focused Group Discussion
FIAP	Feminist International Assistance Policy
FIDA	Paribarik Aye Unnoyan Mohila Songstha
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IGA	Income Generating Activities
KII	Key Informant Interview
KMKS	Khagrapur Mahila Kalyan Samity
MJF	Manusher Jonno Foundation
MMS	Mukti Mahila Samity
NCDW	National Council of Disabled Women
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PMF	Performance Measurement Framework
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SWNB	Sex Workers' Network Bangladesh
UMUS	Uddipto Mohila Unnayan Sangstha
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment
WEAVE	Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment
WRO	Women's Rights Organisation
WVLB	Women's Voice and Leadership Bangladesh

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In a bustling village of Bangladesh, where vibrant colours of culture mix with the struggles of daily life, a young woman stands at the edge of uncertainty. She is surrounded by whispers—whispers of tradition, of the roles she should play, and the limits she should not cross. Her life, like many others, is shaped by expectations that leave little room for her voice, her dreams, or her rights. As she navigates through the familiar paths of her village, she wonders:

Will she ever be able to speak up for herself?

For her rights?

Will her voice, often silenced, ever be heard?



Executive Summary

Bangladesh ranks highest in the Gender Gap Index in South Asia achieving 47th among 144 countries in the world¹. However, at the heart of gender bias and discrimination in Bangladesh lies a deeply rooted undervaluation of women's rights and capabilities, intertwined with historical, cultural, social, and economic factors. This inequity also disproportionately affects marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities, women and adolescent girls, transgender communities, and those living in poverty.

The Women's Voice and Leadership Bangladesh (WVLB) project, funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by MJF, supported 16 local Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) to empower women and promote gender equality. The project provided grants and capacity-building to WROs working with marginalized groups, including violence survivors, ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, migrant workers, sex workers, rural poor, and transgender individuals.

Findings

Relevance

The project demonstrated strong alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contributing to gender equality, economic empowerment, and organizational development, and key national policies, such as the National Women Development Policy and the National Plan of Action to Combat Violence Against Women and Children.

Feminist principles of inclusivity, transformative leadership, empowerment, and participation were central to the project's design. The project's strategies focused on empowering women economically through skill development, advocacy, and awareness on gender equality. Rigorous needs assessments and capacity evaluations ensured that the project addressed the specific needs of marginalized groups, including sex workers, transgenders, returnee migrant women, and victims of violence. Beneficiaries reported significant gains in confidence, skills, and socio-economic empowerment.

¹ The Daily Star. Gender Gap Index: Bangladesh stays top in South Asia (2017)

Effectiveness

The WVLB project met its objectives through a well-defined Theory of Change and a robust Performance Management Framework (PMF), which ensured transparency and accountability. Adaptability to challenges like COVID-19 was achieved by integrating new components and conducting regular monitoring, monthly reporting, and quarterly progress tracking. Financial management was effective, with a 95.3% budget utilization rate and responsive, multi-year funding that supported long-term sustainability for both MJF and smaller WROs.

Targeted capacity-building in leadership, financial management, and SGBV awareness empowered WROs and beneficiaries, enhancing their autonomy and advocacy. Positive societal shifts included gender-sensitive policies and growing grassroots movements. Success stories, such as adolescent girls defying gender norms, showcased the project's transformative impact. Despite challenges, the project effectively tackled vulnerabilities through a dynamic mix of service delivery, capacity building, and advocacy, fostering lasting change and laying a foundation for continued progress in gender equality.

Impact

The project has empowered marginalized communities through grants and capacity-building support. Beneficiaries reported increased confidence and leadership skills, enabling them to advocate for their rights, challenge traditional norms, and take active roles in their communities. Success stories include women avoiding early marriages and transgender individuals gaining economic independence through entrepreneurship. Increased involvement in income-generating activities (IGAs) allowed beneficiaries to achieve financial autonomy, reduce dependency, and elevate their social standing.

Beneficiaries gained knowledge on gender equality and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), leading to greater community influence and participation in decision-making. A key strategy was the inclusion of men and boys, who became active supporters of gender equality, contributing to long-term attitudinal changes within families and communities.

WROs enhanced their operational efficiency, gained donor recognition, and expanded their advocacy efforts. Transgender rights advocacy made significant strides, including policy influence and local activism. The project laid the groundwork for lasting societal change, influencing policy development and empowering beneficiaries to become agents of transformation within their communities.

This project has shown that with the right support and training, marginalized groups can overcome systemic barriers and significantly impact their communities.

Sustainability

Key sustainability pillars included needs assessment for long-term impact, effective outreach and advocacy, capacity development of WRO staff, building network alliances, and beneficiary advocacy and leadership. These strategies strengthen the project's resilience and adaptability, ensuring continued positive outcomes.

Conclusion

The project under Global affairs Canada has been transformative in advancing gender equality and empowering marginalized women and girls. Partnering with 16 WROs, the project has uplifted transgender individuals, Dalits, sex workers, and ethnic minorities. By enhancing advocacy capacities and providing leadership training, rights awareness, and legal support, WVLB has fostered confidence, financial autonomy, and community participation among beneficiaries. Successful advocacy efforts, policy dialogues, and robust networks have sparked progress toward a more inclusive society, with ongoing support needed to sustain this impact.

Recommendations

- ▶ Strengthen advocacy with local government for policy reforms and expand outreach to marginalized communities.
- ▶ Broaden income-generating activities and enhance resource allocation for women's economic empowerment.
- ▶ Increase mental health support and awareness campaigns on gender equality.
- ▶ Improve staffing and Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) within WROs.
- ▶ Enhance risk management and digital systems for data management and strategic planning.

Background

Bangladesh, a country in South Asia, is one of the most populous and densely populated countries in the world, with nearly 170 million² people. It is divided into eight administrative divisions³, each named after a major city. Over the years, Bangladesh has made significant growth, even during times of global uncertainty. However, economic gender-disaggregated data reveals inequalities between women and men, as depicted in the diagram.⁴ Beyond unequal unemployment, marginalized individuals⁵ struggle to access resources and services and cannot fully participate in social, economic, political, cultural, or legal aspects of life. They face limited employment opportunities, low social status, and frequent displacement from their land. These groups are often victims of rights violations, including discrimination, violence, humiliation, threats, and oppression. Their demands are frequently ignored by policymakers, politicians, and even the mainstream population. The transgender population, particularly, is one of the most impoverished and marginalized groups due to their gender identity and sexual orientation.⁶ The lack of data⁷ and ambiguity surrounding marginalized populations exacerbates their plight. This lack of information poses significant challenges to their mainstreaming.

² Bangladesh population. Worldometer.

³ Bangladesh Toponymic Fact file. The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names. (2023)

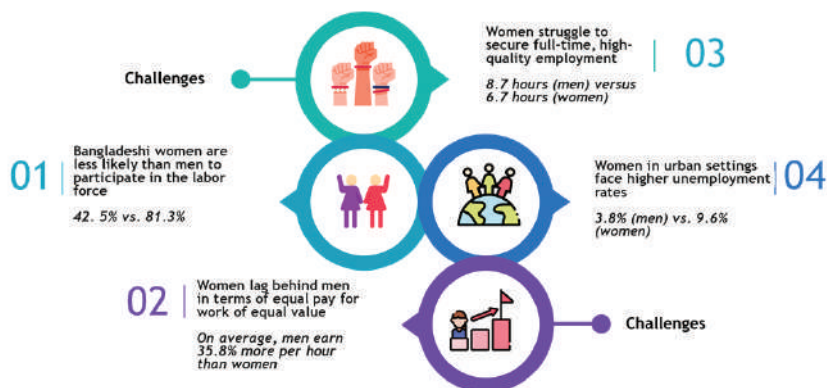
⁴ Wambile, A. et. al. What do gender data reveal about the economic struggles of women in Bangladesh. The World Bank Blogs. The World Bank. (2024)

⁵ Marginalized individuals such as transgenders, sex workers, Dalit, and people with disability (PwD)

⁶ Barua A, Khan S. Addressing violence against transgender people in Bangladesh: A call for policy intervention. (2023)

⁷ The Business Standard. Marginalised communities deprived of access to govt services: TIB study. (2021)

Figure 1: Challenges to gender equality in Bangladesh⁸



About the Project

Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), a leading non-profit, has been working towards empowering marginalized communities since 2002. With over 20 years in this domain, they have partnered with over 400 local organizations to create transformative change. Beyond funding, MJF has equipped communities to demand their rights, held institutions accountable, and shaped inclusive policies.

The Women's Voice and Leadership - Bangladesh (WVLB) project, launched in 2017 by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) under its Feminist International Assistance Policy, supported local Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) in empowering women, promoting gender equality, and protecting human rights in developing countries. With the vital support of GAC, MJF has implemented the project in Bangladesh, provided grants and capacity-building support to grassroots WROs working with marginalized groups, such as violence survivors, ethnic and Dalit women, women with disabilities, migrant workers, sex workers, rural poor women, and transgender individuals, highlights the intersectionality of their experiences and needs. The project aimed to strengthen WROs and Community-based Organizations (CBO) in advocating for these intersecting identities and amplifying their voices with government and decision-makers.

Figure 2: Timeline of the project



⁸ Wambile, A. et. al. What do gender data reveal about the economic struggles of women in Bangladesh. The World Bank Blogs. The World Bank. (2024)

The following is a list of WROs that have been collaborating with MJF. With support from GAC, these organizations have been instrumental in transforming the landscape of gender equality and women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

- ▶ Ananya Kallyan Sangathon (AKS)
- ▶ Bangladeshi Ovivashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA)
- ▶ Concerned Women for Family Development (CWFD)
- ▶ Dalit Empowerment Foundation (DEF)
- ▶ Dener Alo Hijra Songho (DAHS)
- ▶ Khagrapur Mahila Kalyan Samity (KMKS)
- ▶ Mukti Mahila Samity (MMS)
- ▶ National Council of Disabled Women (NCDW)
- ▶ Paribarik Aye Unnoyan Mohila Songstha (FIDA)
- ▶ Pragroshor Shamajik Unnayan and Progoti Kendro
- ▶ Progressive
- ▶ Sex Workers' Network Bangladesh (SWNB)
- ▶ Shustha Jibon
- ▶ The Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS)
- ▶ Uddipto Mohila Unnayan Sangstha (UMUS)
- ▶ Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment (WEAVE)



Evaluation Purpose and Scope

Evaluation Purpose

The evaluation aimed to assess the project's accountability in achieving its goals, focusing on relevance, effectiveness, impact, efficiency, and sustainability. It sought to identify evidence-based findings, contextual factors affecting scalability, and lessons learned to guide future program design. Key objectives included analyzing project performance, the impact of external factors like COVID-19, and the integration of a feminist approach. The evaluation also aimed to identify strengths, challenges, and best practices to inform future strategies and provide recommendations for the project's next phase.

Evaluation Scope

The final evaluation of the WVLB Project was conducted to assess its performance and guide future direction. The evaluation aimed to explore policies, assess alignment with stakeholder needs, suggest strategic improvements, and highlight achievements related to SDGs and feminist principles. Covering work from 2019 to 2023, the evaluation reviewed MJF and WROs' efforts, supported by the government, under an agreement with Global Affairs Canada. The project outcomes were assessed against key indicators identified in the baseline and midline evaluations.

Relevance

This section explores the relevance of WVLB Project design and its alignment with beneficiary priorities. It also highlights the integration of feminist principles in both design and implementation, and the project's consistency with Sustainable Development goals (SDGs) and national-level priorities.

Table 1: Relevance of the project



Relevance of Program Design

The project was anchored by MJF who took the overall responsibility of managing the project along with capacity development and advocacy at the national level. MJF was supported by WROs who worked with clusters and took charge of day-to-day implementation. The design was such that it provided autonomy to the WROs to plan and execute the project to suit beneficiaries' requirements at the same time also aligning to the overall goal of the project. The design incorporated a few of the Feminist International Assistance Policy, (FIAP) principles. These principles were identified to be the most relevant in the context of Bangladesh.



Relevance of strategies, objectives and activities

The project's objectives, aligned with GAC's FIAP, was to economically empower women through capacity-building training, advocacy, and awareness on gender equality and sexual health. By equipping women with vital skills and knowledge, the project provided a strong foundation for them to advance their issues on broader platforms. The activities were finalised after consultations with WROs who were working with the identified clusters of beneficiaries.

Relevance to the needs of beneficiaries



The WVL-Bangladesh project demonstrated strong relevance by tailoring its activities to the specific needs of beneficiaries through rigorous needs assessments, organizational capacity evaluations, and a baseline study. By addressing pressing issues such as gender inequality, discrimination, and limited opportunities and focusing on capacity building for women, transgenders, ethnic groups, and victims of violence, the project delivered targeted interventions like income generation, leadership training, and rights awareness. Beneficiaries overwhelmingly confirmed the project's positive impact, highlighting its effectiveness in building confidence, enhancing skills, and fostering socio-economic empowerment.

100% of beneficiaries from DEF, UMUS, NCDW, CWCS, Shusho Jibon, AKS, KMKS, Progressive, WEAVE, FIDA, and Pragroshar indicating the activities conducted under the project were relevant to them.



Incorporation of feminist principles

The WVLB project has adhered closely to four key feminist principles: **Inclusivity, Transformative leadership, Empowerment, and Participation.**

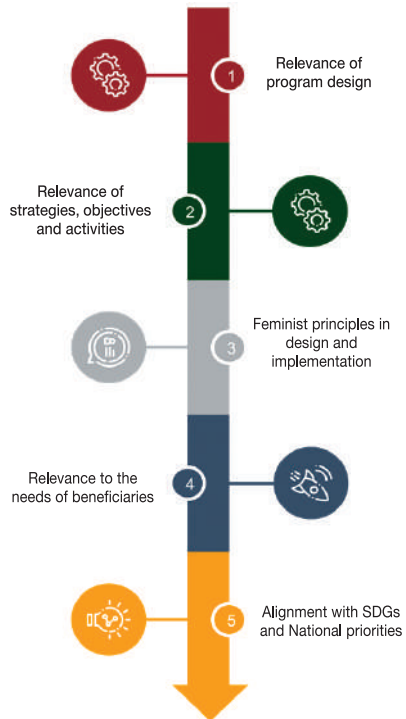
- **Inclusivity** : The WVLB project in its design and implementation plan included communities that were vulnerable and marginalised and were either not reached out or were reached out on limited basis. The clusters encompassed a diverse range of groups, including but not limited to sex workers, Dalits, women with disability, transgender individuals, women migrant workers, adolescents, and young girls, as well as young transgender individuals. The identification of beneficiaries from the clusters was performed by WROs

deploying the parameters that MJF had provided them. The identification based on parameters and on experience of WROs ensured that the most vulnerable beneficiaries were chosen leading to incorporation of principle of inclusivity. Moreover, inclusive staffing practices were central to all clusters, prioritizing representation and engagement with target communities.

▶ **Transformative Leadership:** The project incorporated transformative leadership in its design and aimed at building leadership skills of beneficiaries, networks and WROs. The aim was to capacitate them to challenge power structures, advocate for rights, and drive systemic change, cultivating a new generation of women leaders for lasting gender equality.

▶ **Empowerment:** The project aimed to empower beneficiaries by equipping them with essential resources, skills, and knowledge through activities such as life skill training, self-defense training, leadership boot camps, community-based leadership training, dialogue with duty bearers, agency creation by forming groups, regular community sessions/courtyard meeting, etc. The ultimate goal was to foster self-empowerment and increase their agency, enabling beneficiaries to establish their own businesses, reduce financial burdens, and enhance their roles as independent decision-makers and advocates for their own futures.




▶ **Participation:** Active and meaningful participation of women, men, boys, and parents was integral. Involving them in all project stages ensured interventions were responsive to actual needs, cultivating ownership and accountability among beneficiaries.



Alignment with SDGs and national priorities

The WVLB project strategically aligned with key national policies and SDGs. This alignment was crucial as it ensured the project's efforts were integrated with broader national and global frameworks, amplifying its impact and contributing to long-term, systemic change. The table below depicts the veracity with which the project themes align with the SDGs and national priorities.

Table 2: Alignment with SDGs and national priorities

Theme	SDG	National Priorities	Alignment of the activities
Gender Equality		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ National Women Development Policy 2011 ▶ National Plan of Action to Combat Violence Against Women and Children 2013-2025 	The focus on gender equality directly supports the SDG goal of empowering women and girls. National policies like the Women Development Policy and Action Plan emphasize preventing violence and promoting gender equality.
Economic Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation	 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ National Social Security Strategy 2015 ▶ Bangladesh Bank's Financial Inclusion Initiative 	The economic empowerment of women ties into SDG 8 by promoting decent work, and SDG 10 by reducing inequalities. National policies aim to include marginalized groups in economic opportunities and social security measures.
Organizational Development	 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ National Women Development Policy 2011 ▶ National Social Security Strategy 2015 ▶ Bangladesh Bank's Financial Inclusion Initiative 	Strengthening organizations ensures better delivery of health, gender equality, and social security services. It aligns with national priorities focused on institutional capacity to uphold women's rights and well-being.

Effectiveness

This section highlights the project's effectiveness in executing its objectives seamlessly, whether during its implementation or in adapting to evolving circumstances. The project has consistently ensured that it maximized benefits, responding adeptly to changing environments while maintaining a focus on achieving the best possible outcomes.

Emergence of new narratives and perspectives

Throughout the project, seeds of change began to emerge-whether in shifting narratives, evolving perceptions, altered behaviours, or new responses. Every change, however small, when collectively viewed, contributed to a larger impact. Even modest shifts highlight the project's success, not only for those directly involved but, in hindsight, for society as a whole.

Figure 3: New narratives



- ▶ While gender discussions were not uncommon in Bangladesh, they were often sporadic and might not have been relevant in the context of project's beneficiaries. Practically in the society and the implementation of law, women still faced discrimination, exclusion and injustice and had negligible influence in decision making processes.⁹ Against this the project has advanced gender equality at the ministerial level. Bills are now being drafted with greater gender sensitivity, and a diverse array of stakeholders are engaged in meaningful dialogue on related issues. This increased awareness and collaboration has laid the groundwork for future policy changes.
- ▶ The project has been implemented through an intersectional lens¹⁰ , acknowledging that without it, efforts to tackle inequalities and injustice towards women are likely to just end up perpetuating systems of inequalities. The project acknowledged that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and it is imperative to consider everything and anything that can marginalise people - gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. The project's approach was to address multiple dimensions of vulnerability under the notion that work towards women's rights and feminism cannot defend individuals from a single category alone.
- ▶ The project has empowered WROs to become more effective advocates at broader levels. This has contributed to a growing momentum for gender equality and a shift in advocacy strategies, as exemplified by the Basundhara Mall incident and the inclusion of transgender woman Parvati Ahmed in the working committee for the draft law called the Transgender Persons Rights and Security Law.

Capacity building has led to the empowerment of beneficiaries

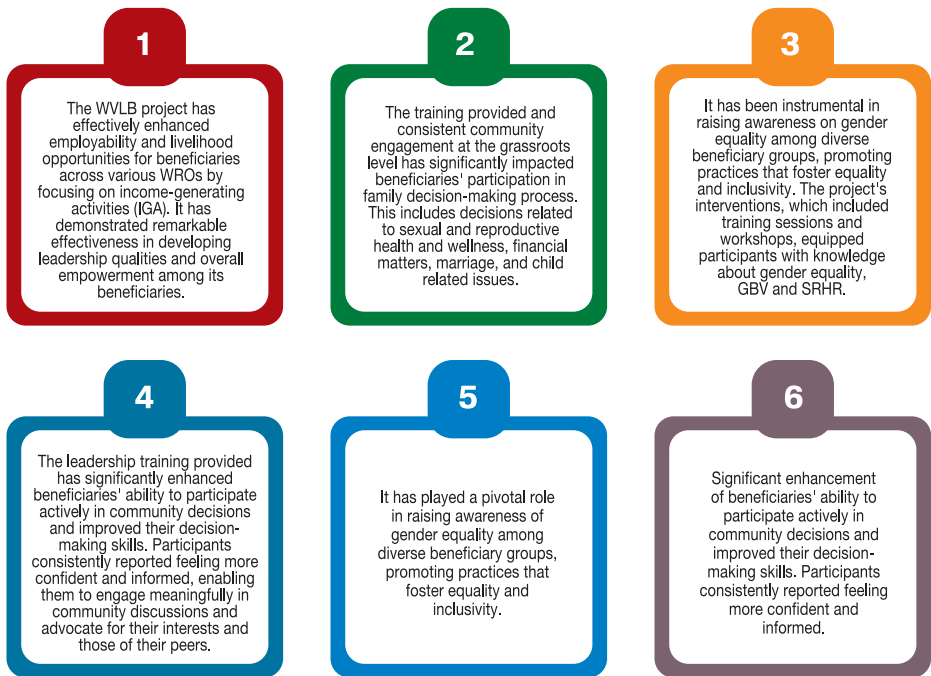
The effectiveness of these initiatives was reflected in the personal and professional growth of the participants, leading to stronger, more resilient communities. Beneficiaries not only gained employment but also became well-informed citizens who can advocate for themselves and their families, contributing to the overall development and well-being of their communities. Income Generating Activities (IGA) has enhanced employability and livelihood opportunities, leading to increased participation in economic activities. The project successfully achieved its goal of building the capacity of beneficiaries.

⁹ World Vision Bangladesh. Gender Equality.

¹⁰ Taylor B. Intersectionality 101: what is it and why is it important? (2019)

"In a rural Bangladeshi village, young girls faced traditional expectations of early marriage and household duties. The WVLB project's leadership training, led by a WRO, shifted their perspectives, empowering them to pursue their dreams, such as forming a girls' football team—a controversial idea in their community. With newfound communication skills, the girls convinced local leaders and families to support their team. Their success not only challenged gender norms but also inspired them to assert their rights in family decisions and advocate for education. WRO's initiatives demonstrated that leadership begins with personal empowerment and challenging societal norms."

Figure 4: Overall empowerment of the beneficiaries

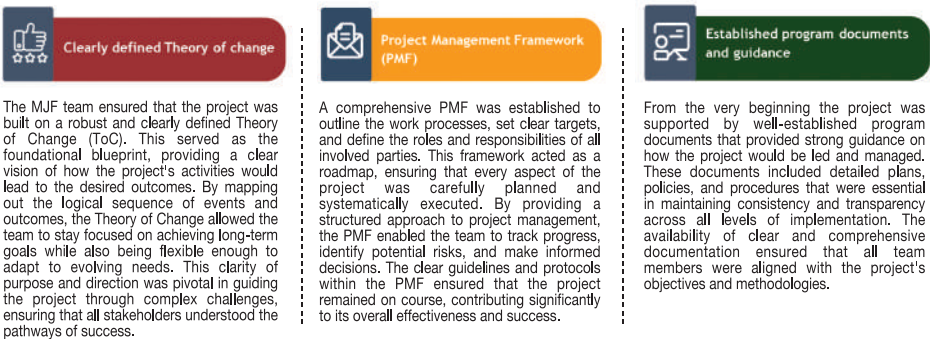


Robust systems and processes contributed to an effective project execution

The project ensured that clear, effective, and robust systems and processes were in place from the very start. A well-defined Theory of Change (ToC) provided a strong foundation, while a detailed Project Management Framework (PMF) outlined the objectives, activities, work processes, and targets at the national level. Each WRO was then provided with the flexibility of developing its own PMF elaborating activities and the targets. While WROs developed their PMFs; MJF team constantly provided them with support and addressed their queries. As a result, the project along with ToC, one national PMF was aided by 16 individual PMFs. All these project documents supported an on time, relevant and effective execution of the project.

Additionally, established program documents such as reporting templates both for program and finance reports, guidelines, a roadmap, checklists along with clear guidance and regular support offered by MJF, provided much needed clarity to WROs and honed their skills that contributed to effective implementation of the project. MJF's on-the-job monitoring and operational capabilities training was effective in building the WROs' capacity to manage their day-to-day operations more efficiently. By focusing on practical skills and providing ongoing mentorship, the WROs could implement more structured and responsive service delivery models.

Figure 5: Systems and processes for effective implementation



Constitution and onboarding of team with clear roles and responsibilities helped project in carrying out defined activities

The project framework significantly enhanced and flourished through its engagement with the 16 WROs. This framework encompassed detailed team structures, inclusive staffing practices emphasizing on a higher female to male ratio, all of which contributed to the project's success in addressing the needs of the beneficiaries. This clarity extended down to the 16 WROs involved, each of which had its own well-defined team with explicitly delineated tasks and responsibilities. Consequently,

the team structures were meticulously organized at both the overall project level and within each WRO, ensuring a cohesive and effective implementation process.

The MJF project was led by a Project Manager, supported by a two-member team, an M&E resource, and a Finance team. Additional team members, including the Country Manager, were involved as needed. This structure ensured clear responsibilities and transparency. While most responsibilities were fulfilled, monitoring visits were less frequent due to the team's size and the evolving nature of the project. Two team members were tasked with managing 16 WROs, which, combined with project modifications resulting from strategic meetings and mid-term assessments, presented significant challenges.

While WROs were given broad guidelines and flexibility in constituting their teams, this led to variations in team structure and resources. The lack of M&E expertise among most WROs resulted in irregular monitoring and reporting. To address these challenges, the MJF team invested significant time in building the capacity of WRO team members in M&E and providing ongoing support for daily reporting.

Throughout the course of the project implementation, the tasks and strategies evolved significantly. The project demonstrated a high degree of flexibility, allowing for the addition and removal of various components as needed. The project effectively adapted to changes and successfully implemented new strategies, with the existing team continuously adjusting to evolving needs. While this made the project more relevant to the needs of beneficiaries it put additional responsibilities on the teams to execute the project with resources initially planned for the project.

Concurrent monitoring and reporting mechanisms ensured the project remained on track

The project was supported by a well-defined monitoring & reporting system both on the program and finance side. This involved periodic reviews of the program strategy of each WRO. These reviews, conducted at specified intervals, led to necessary adjustments in the design challenges and implementation processes. Along with concurrent monitoring the project kept a provision of mid-term and end-term assessment. Various reporting templates were developed, and WROs' capacities were built to report back on the progress in the pre specified templates. This included feeding progress data on MIS and developing word document reports.

- ▶ Each WRO guided by the MJF team established a robust quarterly reporting system that provided detailed insights into activities, achievements, challenges, and lessons learned. These reports promoted accountability and informed decision-making among stakeholders.
- ▶ Quarterly monitoring visits by the MJF team further enhanced project oversight. These visits allowed for real-time evaluations and adjustments of interventions to optimize impact.

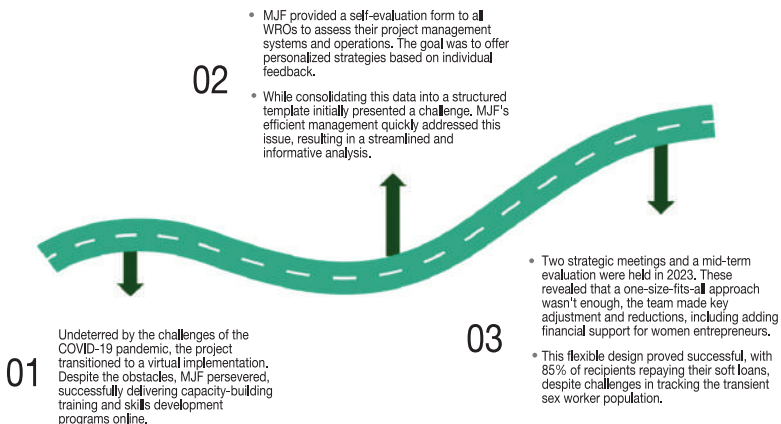
- ▶ Financial monitoring and reporting ensured that any discrepancies are identified and addressed. Further it also ensured taking stock of fund utilisation at a regular interval and fed into the project execution. The stringent financial monitoring and reporting mechanisms led to identification of discrepancies in the accounts of two WROs, which were dropped from the project. While the project initially included 18 WROs, two partnerships were later terminated due to this financial misappropriation.



The project was fluidic in nature; it provided flexibility to all stakeholders to make changes in the strategy and activities; which made the project more appropriate to the needs of beneficiaries

The project's emphasis on multi-year and responsive funding has been particularly critical in providing WROs with the financial security needed to undertake ambitious projects and to respond flexibly to emerging challenges. However, on the path of implementation scattered with challenges and upheavals, flexibility was maintained throughout by the MJF team. This encompassed a skilful adaptation of the project model in the backdrop of COVID-19, providing self-evaluation forms to WROs for offering personalized strategies and incorporation of additional components into the project's existing framework.

Figure 6: Flexibility in project design



Budget allocation and utilization; turning resources into results

Within the WVW Bangladesh program, 60% of the total funding was allocated to WROs, while the remaining 40% was allocated to the MJF program team. Of the total budget of BDT 465,950,965 allocated to MJF, BDT 444,154,703 was utilized, reflecting an overall utilization rate of 95.3%, indicating effective use of the allocated budget.

Breakdown of funds for Women's Rights Organizations (WROs)

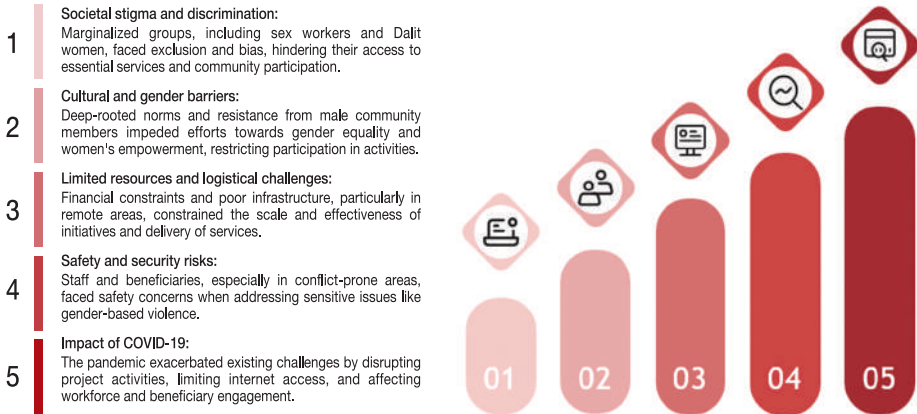
The 60% funding allocated to the WROs was divided into two sub-categories: Multi-Year Funding, which accounted for 59% of the budget, and Fast Responsive Funding, which represented 1%. For Multi-Year Funding, a total of BDT 275,013,826 was allocated, with BDT 264,529,899 utilized, achieving a 96.2% utilization rate. Meanwhile, Fast Responsive Funding received an allocated budget of BDT 3,685,667, out of which BDT 3,404,696 was spent, showing an impressive 92.4% utilization rate. The table describes the budget allocations and utilization rates for 16 Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) managed by the Manusher Jonno Foundation.

Serial	Name of WROs	Budget (BDT)	Utilization (BDT)	Utilization Rate
1	BOMSA	21,810,617	21,319,651	97.7%
2	CWFD	26,921,632	26,161,823	97.2%
3	CWCS	16,981,503	16,376,174	96.4%
4	DEF	13,870,644	13,113,462	94.5%
5	Shustha Jibon LET	13,902,110	13,279,198	95.5%
6	FIDA	15,874,279	15,283,580	96.3%
7	KMKS	20,022,561	19,113,395	95.5%
8	MMS	18,572,352	17,894,824	96.4%
9	NCDW	14,641,438	13,968,384	95.4%
10	Progressive	19,373,797	18,664,935	96.3%
11	Pragroshor	17,394,461	16,669,211	95.8%
12	Progressive-SREYA	20,361,382	19,667,363	96.6%
13	CWFD-FAIR (SWN)	10,325,221	9,525,887	92.3%
14	Shustha Jibon	13,396,761	12,920,411	96.4%
15	UMUS	12,211,707	11,782,341	96.5%
16	WEAVE	19,353,361	18,789,260	97.1%
Total		275,013,826	264,529,899	96.2%

Enabling and limiting factors

The implementation of the project across various WROs encountered several challenges. These challenges highlight the complexity of promoting empowerment and gender equality in marginalized communities.

Figure 7: Enabling and limiting factors



Despite the challenges, the project yielded valuable learnings that contributed to its overall success and impact. A dynamic approach combining direct service delivery, capacity building, and systemic change proved effective in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. Continuous training and capacity building ensured that WRO staff and beneficiaries stayed informed of best practices, fostering adaptability and resilience. Community engagement and empowering beneficiaries to advocate for their rights led to lasting change, while tailored strategies helped navigate cultural, legal, and logistical barriers. Strengthening internal systems and sustained advocacy for policy shifts enhanced organizational resilience and influenced government stakeholders, laying the groundwork for continued progress in promoting gender equality and empowerment.

Impact

With the near-perfect execution of the project, documenting its impact on the beneficiaries was essential to capture its successes. The project provided the much-needed momentum for WROs and stakeholders, sparking small, short-term changes that have created lasting impacts both at the broader level and down to the most granular details. One of its kinds, the project has begun structured and much-needed discourses on gender, changes in policy environment and societal shift in terms of acceptance of gender as an issue to focus on. While societal norms may take time to evolve, this represented a significant step toward long-term change. For those who have long felt marginalized, this project has provided the impetus to overcome barriers and claim their rightful place within their communities. By bridging the gap, it has empowered them to participate actively in societal change, no longer merely as bystanders but agents of transformation.

Short Term Impacts

The project led to transformation in lives and livelihood of the beneficiaries

The project has helped many beneficiaries lead their lives with dignity, initiating a process where the beneficiaries are now being accepted in their families and in the community at large. The project-built agencies of beneficiaries and led them to take charge of their lives. There are numerous examples where returnee migrant women, transgenders, sex workers, women and adolescent girls have witnessed changes in their lives. They reported feeling more empowered, confident and motivated. The most significant change brought by the project is easy accessibility to resources/services identified as crucial to lead a dignified life.

"I grew up in a small village where the traditional expectations for girls were clear: marry young and stay at home to take care of the household. However, even as an adolescent girl, I always had a strong desire for something more, a life where I could achieve my own dreams and make a meaningful impact. My life took a transformative turn when I got involved with my WRO.

I had the opportunity to attend various awareness programs focused on sexual and gender-based violence, child marriage, sexual health, and women's rights. These programs opened my eyes to the possibilities beyond the confines of my village's traditional roles. The training I received was good. I learned about vital resources, such as hotline numbers and legal services, available to support women facing abuse and injustice. With this newfound knowledge at a young age, I began to take an active role in my community. Today, I proudly serve as a group leader of the women adolescent group in my village. In this role, I passionately advocate against child marriage, working tirelessly to educate others about its harmful consequences. I have even helped myself and a friend avoid being forced into early marriages, standing up against societal pressures and making our voices heard.

My efforts have not gone unnoticed. I am now respected in my community, seen as a young leader and a beacon of hope for many girls who share the same dreams I once had. By educating and empowering others, I am helping to create a future where girls in my village can aspire to more than just traditional roles, a future where they can pursue their own dreams and contribute to a more equitable society.

-Beneficiary from one of the WROs

The project after strategic meet and the mid-term review made some changes in the project activities. One of the activities that was added focused around economic development. Beneficiaries were provided with a flexible financial support and were encourage to either start a new business or strengthen existing one. This activity proved to be a game changer for those who were part of it. There are instances where people began new businesses and have been able to sustain it. The businesses not only provided them with a regular income but also led to shift in societal attitude towards them. Many who started as individuals have engaged, after growth in business, other members from their communities providing them with a regular source of income. There are testimonies which are examples of project's impact on the beneficiaries.

"I am a transgender man, and life has never been easy for people like me in our society. From an early age, I faced rejection, ridicule, and a complete lack of opportunities for employment. The constant discrimination made it difficult to envision a future where I could live with dignity and self-sufficiency. However, my life took a turn when I joined my WRO.

I received a loan to start my own tea shop and comprehensive training on how to run a business. My shop's success not only provided me with a stable income but also acceptability as a human being. Today, I am treated like any other human being, a recognition that I once thought impossible. My tea shop stands as a testament to my resilience and determination, and it has transformed my life in ways I never imagined. I am now able to live with dignity, secure in the knowledge that I can provide for myself.

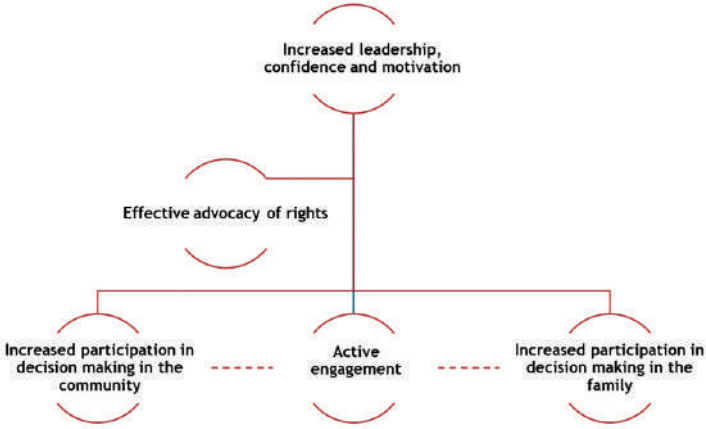
This support has given me the opportunity to show that transgender individuals can contribute meaningfully to society. This program has not only changed my life but has also begun the process of shifting societal perceptions, demonstrating that with the right support and opportunities, we can all achieve our potential."

-Beneficiary from one of the WROs

The project has increased beneficiaries' confidence and leadership skills

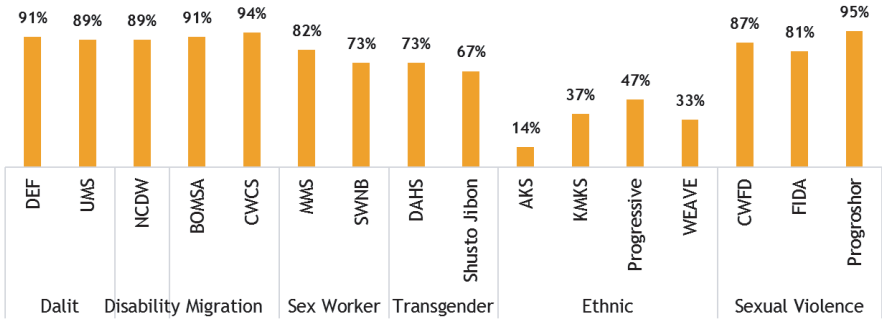
Beneficiaries, including Dalits, individuals with disabilities, migration groups, transgender individuals, and various ethnic communities, have demonstrated remarkable growth in their leadership qualities and self-confidence. Through targeted training and mentorship, these individuals have gained essential skills such as public speaking, decision-making, and strategic thinking, enabling them to take on leadership roles both within their communities and beyond. Increased participation empowered individuals, particularly women and marginalized groups, to actively influence decision-making within their communities and families. The study

represents accumulated data of 67% of the beneficiaries who have shown greater involvement in decision-making processes. This led to greater assertiveness in areas such as sexual and reproductive health, financial planning, and marriage-related decisions.



As a result, decision-making processes within households and communities have become more balanced and reflective of diverse perspectives.

Figure 8: Improved decision making (1,211)



In retrospect, it's often the small sparks of change that ignite the most enduring transformations over time. The impact of this project has the potential to leave a lasting mark on the lives of its beneficiaries. The confidence and leadership skills they have gained can empower them to engage more meaningfully at higher levels of decision-making. On a personal level, it has instilled a strong sense of self and identity, positioning them not only as beneficiaries but as future mentors capable of supporting others, creating a ripple effect within their communities.

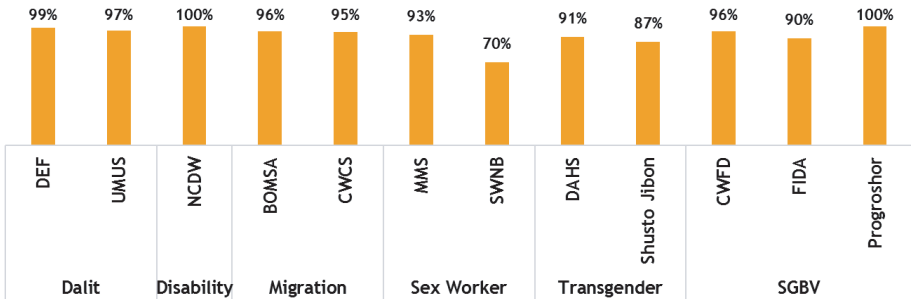
The development of leadership qualities and newfound confidence has empowered these women to increase their families' income. By gaining financial autonomy and establishing their businesses, these women are now able to invest in their children's education, their families' health, and their own well-being, fostering greater equality within their communities.

"If you ask me the greatest outcome of the project, it is sitting with you discussing about the project. After long, we have been given the opportunity to sit and deliberate on issues of gender and empowerment. This is a big deal for us." - Beneficiary, WRO

The project has heightened awareness on gender equality and SGBV

Increased awareness has empowered beneficiaries to challenge discriminatory practices and advocate for their rights with greater confidence. The accumulated data shows that 93% of the beneficiaries are aware of gender equality and SGBV. Armed with a deeper understanding of their rights, they feel more equipped to advocate for themselves, particularly in areas such as their rights, sexual and reproductive health, financial planning, and marriage-related decisions.

Figure 9 : The project has developed the courage and ability to raise voice and speak publicly against rights violations (N=1,211)



The project as mentioned earlier has begun the process where beneficiaries have become motivated and confident to question and address some of the discriminatory practises. Through the support of the WROs beneficiaries are working towards creating a conducive environment for them to lead a dignified life. The project has built awareness and capacities leading to adoption of favourable practises and having a positive attitude. Shift in attitude and practises is a long-drawn process; while the project has not led to complete transition of community in terms of having a positive attitude and favourable practises it has begun the process of introspection and moving towards creating a favourable environment.

"I am a proud member of one of the WROs, my organization is dedicated to supporting transgender individuals like me. Growing up, I faced constant discrimination and exclusion from society, which often left me feeling isolated and hopeless. However, everything changed when I joined this organization. This organization provided me not only with employment but also with comprehensive training in advocacy and leadership skills.

Here, we worked tirelessly to build strong networks with government officials and other key stakeholders. Our collective efforts focused on advocating for better services and improved rights for our community. One of our most significant achievements was the establishment of a dedicated third counter in hospitals specifically for transgender individuals. This initiative ensured that transgender people receive medical attention with respect and dignity, eliminating the stigma and prejudice that often accompanied their visits to healthcare facilities. Through our persistent advocacy, we have made substantial progress in ensuring that transgender individuals are treated with the same level of care and respect as anyone else. Today, when any transgender person goes to the hospital, they experience an environment that acknowledges their identity and addresses their unique needs. This milestone not only benefits me but also empowers my fellow community members, reinforcing our collective sense of belonging and dignity.

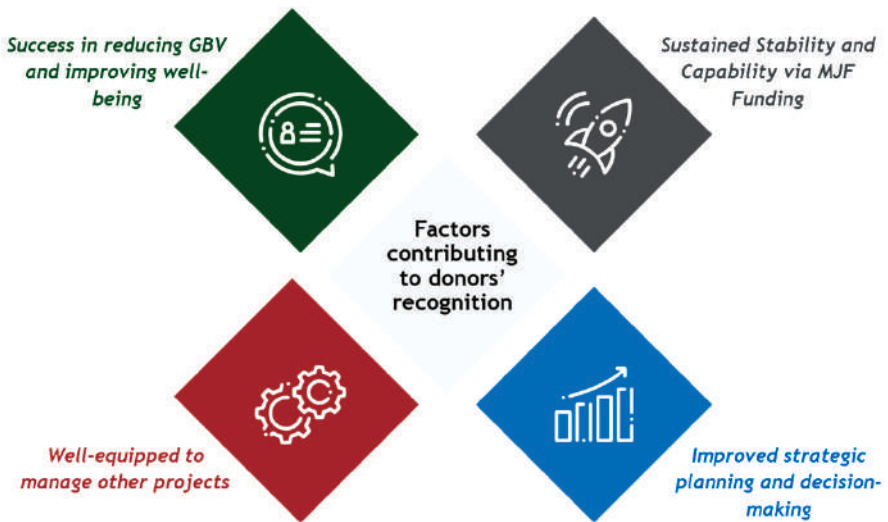
Joining this WRO transformed my life, providing me with the tools and confidence to stand up for my rights and the rights of others. I am incredibly grateful for the support and opportunities I have received, and I am committed to continuing our work to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all transgender individuals."

~ One of the WRO staff

The project boosted WROs' visibility and recognition across donor landscape

The WWLB project has significantly enhanced the operational efficiency of the WROs by providing targeted training that has strengthened various aspects of their internal management capabilities. The enhanced capacity of the WROs has significantly increased their visibility and recognition from various donors, enabling them to expand their work and reach more people. Their successful implementation of programs on gender equality and women's empowerment, backed by a deep understanding of these issues, has established them as reliable and effective partners. With the financial stability and momentum provided by MJF, these organizations are now well-equipped to handle additional projects, positioning them as capable and trusted by donors looking to invest in impactful initiatives.

Figure 10 : Factors contributing to donor recognition



Medium Term Impact

The project has led to increase in income and reduced financial dependence

Beneficiaries across various groups, including individuals with disabilities, transgender individuals, and marginalized communities, have shown a significant rise in engagement with income-generating activities (IGAs). As a result, beneficiaries have not only acquired practical skills but have also gained confidence in starting and sustaining their own businesses, like flower shops, chocolate selling, cloth shops, food, and tea stalls.

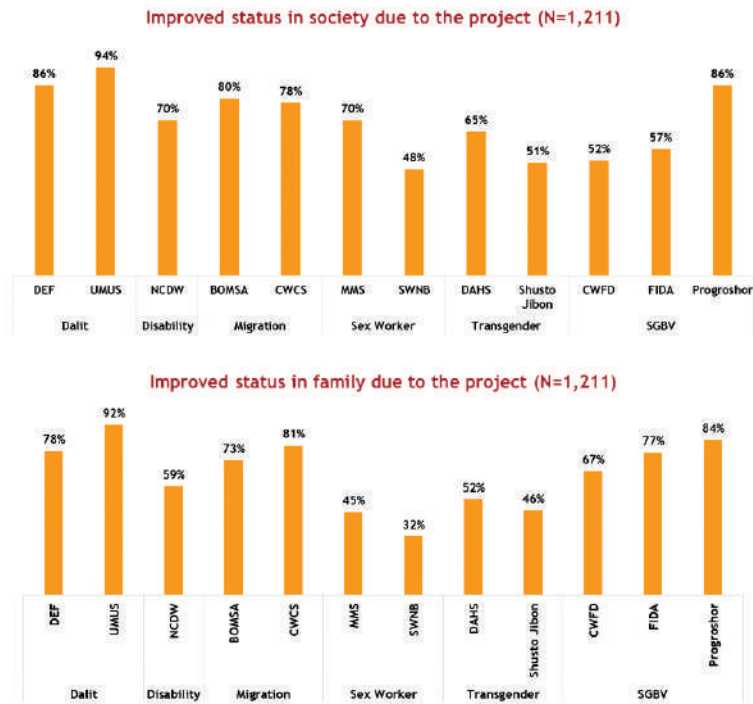
Figure 11 Ripple effect generated by increased financial autonomy



With increased incomes, participants gained financial autonomy that led to an improvement in their overall quality of life, allowing them to make informed decisions about their spending, savings, and investments. Furthermore, the increased economic stability has reduced their dependence on external financial support, fostering a sense of self-reliance and empowerment that extends beyond economic aspects to positively influence their social and familial roles as well. The graphs below depict this positive outcome.

It is important to note that the return rate of loan provided to individuals has been impressive. The project has been able to get the amount back from more than 97 percent beneficiaries. The defaulters primarily belonged to the floating population. As a result of financial inclusion, 70% of beneficiaries who received support have achieved an improved status in society, with 66% experiencing enhanced standing within their families.

Figure 12: Improved status in society and family



Involvement of men and boys has led to shift in mindset and redefined family dynamics

A cornerstone of the project was the active involvement of men and boys in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Recognizing that lasting change requires the participation of both genders, the project equipped men with knowledge and understanding of gender issues. This initiative cultivated shared awareness and acknowledgment that gender equality issues persist and must be addressed collaboratively. There has been a shift in mind-sets whereby men have become more supportive of women within their families and communities, allowing women to participate in training, advocacy, and business activities. Women reported increased empathy and support from men in household chores and childcare. The project observed a growing understanding among men regarding women's participation in family decision-making, particularly concerning investments, spending, savings, and children's education. Men have become more receptive to women's suggestions on these issues and have acknowledged and accepted their increased roles.

"Before joining the WRO's program, I felt ashamed of my work as a migrant worker. People in my community would make negative assumptions about me, but I knew I was doing nothing wrong. The program changed everything.

Through the workshops and discussions, I learned to break free from the stigma and feel proud of what I do. I gained the confidence to start my own vegetable stall business and became more involved in my family's decision-making. My family also accepted the work that I do and had confidence in me.

Now, I can invest in my children's education and contribute to our family's well-being. I'm no longer just a participant in society; I'm an active agent of change." - Beneficiary, WRO

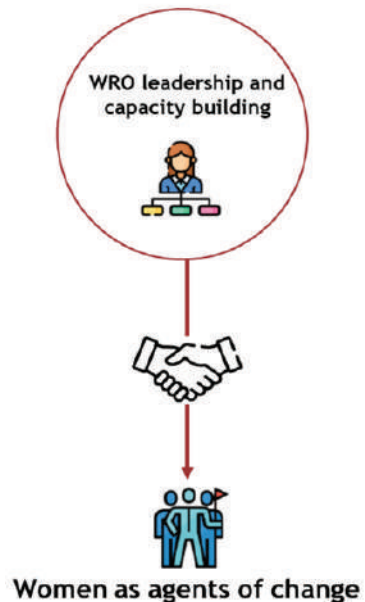
WROs nurtured women into becoming agents of change

With increased confidence, leadership, and advocacy, the beneficiaries are now more effective in championing their rights, addressing systemic barriers, and influencing policy changes at local, national, and even international levels. This empowerment has amplified not only their individual voices but also generated a collective momentum that significantly enhanced the impact of the WROs.

The emergence of beneficiaries as community leaders and advocates for critical social issues is a testament to the WROs' progress and sustainability. These organizations have cultivated individuals who are not merely passive observers but active catalysts of change, transforming advocacy into tangible action.

The beneficiaries' enhanced advocacy skills have expanded the WROs' networks, strengthening their ability to influence policy and drive social change.

Several beneficiaries have achieved remarkable success, becoming influential figures who steered changes at various levels. Through movements, gatherings, and active participation in dialogues and discussions, they continue to make a lasting impact. The following examples showcase their achievements.



- ▶ Sagarika was a pioneering Trans councillor elected to the Rajshahi District Corporation in 2023, serves as the secretary of Diner Alo.
- ▶ In a landmark event, Shustho Jibon organized a massive flash mob in front of Basundhara City Shopping Complex, one of Bangladesh's largest malls, after transgender individuals were denied entry. This demonstration, the largest transgender pride event in Bangladesh's history, highlighted the ongoing discrimination faced by the LGBTQ community. Despite this significant protest, Bangladeshi law continues to fall short in providing adequate support for LGBTQ individuals.
- ▶ In another incident, a gay member of the community was subjected to violence and robbery after using a dating app. Shustho Jibon responded with sensitivity, reframing the event to avoid further complications and working with local police to resolve the matter. The lack of legal protection for LGBTQ rights in Bangladesh, particularly under Article 377, limits their ability to openly advocate for their rights. As a result, the transgender community often plays a crucial role in protecting and advocating for the rights of all LGBTQ individuals.

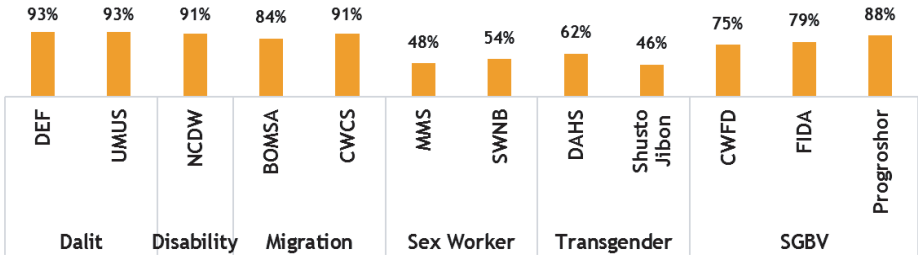
Long Term Impact

The WVLB project has catalysed positive policy shifts

The project has created a positive and empowering atmosphere for beneficiaries, who once believed their goals were unattainable. The individual journeys of beneficiaries have illuminated the path to policy change. Armed with newfound knowledge and skills, once-marginalized individuals have become powerful advocates, using their voices to shape laws and policies. The case of Parvati Ahmed, a transgender woman who became part of the draft committee for the transgender bill, is just one example of how beneficiaries are driving change from the grassroots to the policy level.

These individuals, once relegated to the margins of society, are now at the forefront of social movements, advocating for their rights and challenging systemic inequalities. Through their tireless efforts, they are not only transforming their own lives but also inspiring others to join the fight for a more just and equitable world. The study indicates that 75% of the beneficiaries have experienced an improved standard of living at home while participating in the Women's Voice and Leadership Bangladesh Project.

Figure 13: Creation of a cheerful/happy atmosphere at home leading to improved standard of living (N=1,211)



The WROs deserve recognition for their tireless efforts at the grassroots level, working with the most vulnerable communities and embodying the principle of intersectionality. Given Bangladesh's political landscape and the underrepresentation of gender equality and marginalized groups, MJF's support has been instrumental in driving meaningful change.

While the project could have focused solely on policy training, it strategically prioritized equipping beneficiaries with life skills, knowledge, and a strong understanding of their rights, laying a solid foundation for widespread and far-reaching policy changes. Thus, the project has set a precedent, influencing government policies, where the government is now drafting bills for the transgender community and beneficiaries playing an integral part in the same.

Sustainability

By aligning with community priorities, expanding outreach, strengthening organizational capacities, fostering collaborative networks, and enhancing beneficiary self-reliance, the project has established a robust foundation for ongoing success and resilience. These efforts collectively contribute to the project's ability to adapt to changing circumstances and sustain its positive impact over time.

Figure 14: Sustainability of the project

1 Needs assessment for long-term impact

The project's sustainability was driven by a thorough needs assessment that ensured alignment with the community's priorities. This approach allowed WROs to allocate resources efficiently, ensuring resilience and adaptability to changing circumstances.

4 Building network alliances

Strategic alliances, such as the Survivors' Network and the Alliance for Women Migrant Voices, fostered collaboration, advocacy, and resource sharing. These networks ensured ongoing support for vulnerable groups, creating a sustainable framework for community empowerment.

2 Effective outreach and advocacy

Advocacy and outreach efforts expanded the project's reach, securing critical support and fostering community ownership. WROs reported increased visibility and engagement, especially among women, transgender individuals, and persons with disabilities, ensuring long-term impact.

5 Beneficiary advocacy and leadership

Leadership training equipped beneficiaries with skills in decision-making, financial management, and entrepreneurship. This self-reliance reduced dependency on external aid, creating a lasting impact and ensuring the project's continued relevance and effectiveness.

3 Capacity development of WRO staff

Training programs in financial management, organizational development, and advocacy strengthened WRO staff capacity, ensuring effective resource management and leadership in gender equality. The culture of continuous learning fostered resilience and sustainability.

Conclusion

The Women's Voice and Leadership - Bangladesh (WVLB) project, launched by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by Manusher Jonno Foundation, has been instrumental in advancing gender equality and empowering marginalized women and girls. By partnering with 16 Women's Rights Organizations (WROs), the project has effectively supported diverse groups, including transgender individuals, Dalits, sex workers, and ethnic minorities.

Aligned with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy, the WVLB project has strengthened WROs' advocacy and operational capacities while empowering individuals through leadership training, rights awareness, and legal support. This has led to increased confidence, improved decision-making, and greater community and economic participation among beneficiaries.

Notable achievements include successful advocacy for marginalized groups' rights, enhanced leadership and financial autonomy among beneficiaries, and the establishment of strong networks for lasting impact. The project's focus on intersectionality has ensured that even the most marginalized individuals benefit from its programs, contributing to a more inclusive society.

Despite these successes, continued support for WROs, expansion to underserved areas, and targeted interventions remain crucial for sustaining progress. The WVLB project stands as a powerful example of meaningful change through dedicated advocacy, strategic partnerships, and a commitment to empowering the marginalized, laying the groundwork for ongoing gender equality and social justice in Bangladesh.

Recommendations

Considering the WVLB project's achievements and challenges, the following recommendations are proposed to further enhance its impact and sustainability. These recommendations are designed to address key areas such as advocacy, economic empowerment, awareness, staffing, and risk management. By strengthening collaboration with local government bodies, expanding economic opportunities, boosting awareness and mental health support, improving staffing and monitoring, and enhancing risk management and digital systems, the project can build on its successes and ensure continued progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of marginalized women and girls in Bangladesh.

Figure 15 : Recommendations



Enhance advocacy and outreach

1

Strengthen engagement with local government bodies for policy reforms and expand outreach to remote and marginalized communities using local media and awareness events like Mahila Nari gatherings. Increase recurring advocacy training for beneficiaries and Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) to build skills in legal rights, public speaking, and leadership.

Expand economic opportunities

2

Broaden the scope of income-generating activities by partnering with agencies and exploring diverse sectors. Implement effective resource allocation and provide handholding support, including mentorship and market access, to help women succeed economically.

Boost awareness and mental health support

3

Increase community campaigns on gender equality and women's rights using multimedia approaches. Expand mental health counselling services with culturally sensitive methods and establish partnerships to support women facing trauma and stress.

Improve staffing and M&E

4

Address understaffing in WROs by hiring more staff, offering competitive salaries, and enhancing working conditions. Increase the number of M&E personnel to monitor progress, evaluate outcomes, and support funding proposals with modern tools and techniques.

Strengthen risk management and digital systems

5

Develop comprehensive risk mitigation plans for potential crises and implement pre-strategic planning for future challenges. Enhance the Management Information System (MIS) platform for efficient data management and provide digital training for users to ensure effective utilization.

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