

# A letter from Bangladesh – Developing gender-responsive community policing in Bangladesh

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**Abstract** This article reports on the development of a multi-agency partnership project to introduce gender-responsive community policing in Bangladesh. It considers the nature of crime prevention and community-policing forum initiatives in four pilot sites and examines some of the difficulties encountered and progress made in promoting police responsiveness and the safety of women and other vulnerable groups in Bangladesh society.

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## Introduction

There has been a growing interest in recent years in applying ‘community policing’ approaches to crime control beyond the Anglo-American context, notably through ideas of police-community reciprocity, mobilisation of non-police agencies, decentralisation of command, and emphasis on crime prevention and problem-solving (Manning, 1984; Goldstein, 1987; Skolnick and Bayley, 1988). Indeed, international organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union, donor countries and non-government organisations generally regard community policing as an alternative to top-down, coercive, non-accountable, paramilitary policing and the key to

instilling democratic norms in state police institutions and fostering social change and good governance. Yet, promoting policy transfer of community policing in the global context is by no means straightforward, especially in post-colonial and post-conflict societies. For example, Brogden (2005) noted the decidedly mixed results and warned of the dangers of transplanting a western-oriented model without attention to indigenous conditions, customary codes, state police illegitimacies, and the local and legal structures. In South Africa, for example, 'the community enthusiasm and radical logic for community control of the police at the end of apartheid [was largely replaced] ... by a range of COP forums in prosperous White areas and rhetorical discourse within some Black townships. The forums seem to have simply reinforced schism rather than harmony' (Brogden, 2005, p. 81). So what are the limits and possibilities of developing community policing in jurisdictions with a history of police misuse of power and a deficit of democratic accountability?

In this article, we report on the interim findings of a multi-agency partnership project to promote community policing in Bangladesh. In 2007/2008, the German government organisation *German International Co-operation* (GIZ) set up a three-year 'Gender-responsive community-based policing' project as part of its wider 'Promotion of Legal and Social Empowerment of Women' development programme in Bangladesh, and we followed the project as external consultants. How does community policing work in Bangladesh? Does it work? And what are the wider lessons to be learnt from the Bangladesh experience?

### **Crime and Policing in Bangladesh – The Context**

Bangladesh achieved its independence after the Liberation War of 1971. Nevertheless, its police force remains governed by the Police Act of 1861 of the colonial era and has been widely perceived to be 'deeply dysfunctional', 'unprofessional', 'politicised' and 'unaccountable' (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2008). Bangladesh's deep-seated problems are reflected in its low world ranking of lawfulness (155th out of 158 countries) according to indicators of police performance, the rule of law, and the prevalence of various types of crime and corruption (Dijk, 2006). Indeed, there is a long history of police misconduct and violence, including the use of torture to extract confessions, abuse in custody and other human rights violations in Bangladesh. In an environment where working conditions and police pay are extremely poor and impunity is commonplace, police corruption is rampant and systemic. According to Transparency International Bangladesh (2008), 96.6 per cent of households that interacted with local law enforcement agencies have experienced some form of corruption.

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to police abuse and other forms of crime and insecurity in Bangladesh. A study conducted by United Nations

Population Fund (2000) found that 47 per cent of Bangladeshi women have been physically assaulted by their husbands and partners. The problem of acid-throwing as a result of family and land disputes or dowry demands has also been well-documented ([www.acidsurvivors.org](http://www.acidsurvivors.org)). Significantly, violence against women tends to be under-reported and under-recorded. The World Health Organization's (2005) study on 24 000 women in 10 countries (including Bangladesh) shows that women often suffer family or sexual violence in silence. There are no reliable official crime statistics, but the GIZ baseline survey into victimization in Bangladesh confirmed a high level of crime victimisation and a prevailing sense of anxiety and insecurity among female respondents, including fear of murder; fear of being hijacked, raped, attacked, robbed, harassed; fear of police and other law enforcers (READ, 2009). Even when crime is reported, 'weak implementation of legal procedures and ineffective and improper investigation by the police often result in low rate of convictions and high level of acquittals in violence against women cases' (Miles and Sengupta, 2006).

### Early Forms of Community Policing

In response, there have been a number of indigenous as well as externally-driven attempts to reform the Bangladesh police and to develop some form of community policing since the early 1990s. These ranged from *ad hoc* vigilante groups, citizens' committees and neighbourhood watch initiatives set up by senior police officers, the creation of 20 000 community-policing forums and a small number of 'model *thanas*' (police stations) under the United Nations Development Programme-sponsored Police Reform Programme (PRP), to NGO-initiated community police forums (CPFs), alternative dispute resolution forums and legal aid support schemes (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2009). In 2009, the Bangladesh police published a 50-page 'National Strategy of Community Policing' under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme-sponsored PRP.

Notwithstanding the proliferation of policing initiatives, the results of community policing in Bangladesh have been decidedly mixed. Examples of effective police-community partnership and discussion of local crime problems were limited and short-lived. Observers pointed to a number of common problems in the implementation of community policing, including a lack of consultation and coordination, agency rivalries, police resistance, public mistrust and hostility. Some of the *ad hoc* police-initiated CPFs were seen to have created 'a new layer of small-time elite between the police and public along with the potential for abuse and corruption'. In some areas, police ordered villagers to patrol the main highway after a series of robberies and regarded community policing as a way to dump their responsibilities; in other areas, community

policing became just another forum for ruling parties to target the opposition (for example, to file false complaints against political opponents) (International Crisis Group, 2009).

It is against the background of these wider challenges that the GIZ multi-partnership project on gender-responsive community-based policing has to be understood.

## Developing Gender-Responsive Community Policing

In 2007/2008 the German government organization, GIZ, set up (with funding from the Dutch government) a three-year 'Gender-responsive community-based policing' project in Bangladesh. The multi-agency partnership project draws on some of the well-rehearsed criminological ideas of crime prevention, problem-solving policing and police-community partnerships as well as practical lessons learnt from a community-based policing programme in Nepal (Miles, 2010).

Under the GIZ project, gender-responsive community policing is defined as:

A partnership approach between police and the public built on respect of local diversity and context using mechanisms that ensure the safety and security needs of the community members – especially the vulnerable groups – are addressed... It is an organizational strategy that allows the police and community to work together in new ways to solve problems of crime, disorder and safety and a part of law enforcement and access to justice approach with focus on crime prevention and control mechanism... The ultimate goals of gender-responsive community policing are to make communities a better and safer place for all their members and to contribute towards making the police force a more professional, responsive and accountable institution. (Miles and Sengupta, 2006)

The GIZ community policing project had a number of obstacles to contend with. Much of the initial project work and efforts to implement a 'bottom-up' approach was hampered by the wider politics of police reform in Bangladesh, resistance from police headquarters, and the legacy of *ad hoc* development of community policing discussed earlier. Local negotiations were time-consuming; even when the project was able to identify dedicated frontline police officers as key partners, continuity was often hampered by personnel transfers within the local police. Subsequent facilitation and development work in the implementation sites was overseen by a GIZ principal adviser and a project officer and carried out by local NGO implementation partners and reviewed by external consultants. Project implementation was conducted through existing or newly established CPFs in four chosen sites, with the objectives to increase women's representation in these forums; provide gender-responsive training for police and NGOs and community-policing forum members;

improve the awareness of crimes perpetrated against women; reduce the fear of crime and, ultimately, increase community safety, especially among poor people and women in intervention areas.

The work of the four implementing non-government organisation partners of community policing – Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA) in Madaripur, Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) in Mymensingh, Light House in Bogra and Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) in Thakurgaon – reflects different operational approaches and some of the main differences between urban and rural areas in Bangladesh. One implementing partner is a rural organisation with many active members working to realise their communities' and district's development, often on a voluntary basis. As one GIZ external consultant observed,

One of the CPF members, when asked about how information is shared between their CPF and the community, explained 'it is not like a task, we are all together, the community is the same people as us'. There is continuous informal sharing of information between CPF members, the [implementing] staff, and their shared community. This informal sharing of information has value yet it is rarely recognized in project designs or measured. For this project, it is an important mechanism for trust building between the CPFs and the communities. (Main-Thomson, 2010, p. 4)

In contrast, another implementing partner that operates primarily as an urban organisation has developed an operational approach that takes into account the more structured and formalised relationships in an urban environment. 'It is a required approach which reflects the urban and peri-urban reality that there are fewer informal discussions between neighbours because there is less chance they know each other and have the trust of each other as in the rural areas' (ibid). Other implementing partners make use of technological developments and the penetration of low-cost mobile phone services in Bangladesh in recent years to assist them to straddle the urban and rural divide. For example, they use mobile phones as a way of complementing the formal monthly CPF meetings and this has become 'an effective informal means of communicating with the CPF members daily and weekly to discuss CPF activities, difficulties, achievements etc' (ibid).

## Assessing Community Policing in Bangladesh

A mid-term assessment of the three-year community policing project was conducted between July and August 2010 by an independent consultancy team (READ, 2010). A large-scale survey was conducted using a structured and standardised questionnaire, covering a total of 1037 randomly selected households in districts where CPFs have been established with adult women ( $n=899$ ),

adolescent girls ( $n=138$ ), adult men ( $n=445$ ) and adolescent boys ( $n=74$ ). Four Participatory Rapid Assessment Workshops involving 129 participants were also conducted in the four implementation sites to assess the functioning of the local CPFs and the views and experiences of agency partners. In addition, a sample of CPF meetings was observed and further interviews were conducted with police officers across the districts. So how do the CPFs work, and to what extent have they impacted on local police-community relationships and perceptions of community safety?

First, the nature of community-policing activities promoted and developed under the GIZ project is diverse and reflects priorities and needs in each area. Many of the CPF activities were directly related to crime prevention such as drug dealing and theft; some were specifically aimed at addressing hitherto hidden forms of women's victimisation, including 'eve-teasing' (sexual harassment), domestic violence, dowry tortures, and kidnapping. Other CPF activities and meetings were geared towards identifying and resolving local problems such as land disputes.

CPF members were involved in identifying community problems and planning necessary actions to enhance community safety. 'Safety' in the community was broadly conceived, and local improvement projects that were regarded as important to local people such as road safety and house repair, removal of water logging, setting up of electricity poles were undertaken under this broad remit. Other CPF activities were oriented towards community mobilisation and building trust. For example, local CPFs organised a range of public rallies, fairs, football matches, cooking competitions, game shows, street drama and school projects to promote local police-community partnerships and crime-prevention awareness. CPF members were also given training in areas that they themselves regarded as important, such as First Aid, gender issues, the *salish*, legal rights, and in relation to the International Committee of the Red Cross manual on human rights.

### **Empowering Women in Bangladesh**

Second, the number of community-policing forums and the level of women's participation in these forums increased steadily during the first year of the GIZ project. Increasing the overall level of women's participation on CPFs was regarded as crucial to the promotion of an improved response to crimes against women. Special efforts were made to achieve a 30 per cent female CPF representation quota as a means of giving women a collective voice at CPF meetings, especially on preventing crime in the private sphere and promoting safety for women and girls in their everyday lives. Women took part in promoting adult literacy campaigns, local forestation activities and health care programmes, and in the creation of a women-friendly living environment in general. Many were actively involved in organising community mobilisation

events, and this contributed to their capacity building as equal members of the CPFs. To some women, these were small but potentially life-changing experiences. As the external consultant pointed out,

For some women, attending the CPF meetings is the first time that they have been able to leave their homes without a male family member chaperone. For these woman, to attend meetings, even in a passive role, is an achievement of this project's contribution to women's empowerment and gender equality. Other women CPF members are already experiencing a higher level of empowerment and, for example, may be attending the local college. For these woman, having their voices heard and respected by their CPF member peers is an achievement which moves them a step further towards empowerment and equality with men. (Main-Thomson, 2010, p. 8)

### **Police–CPF Relationships**

Despite some notable achievements, local CPFs faced a number of constraints in their work. Some encountered political interference, for example, by local interest groups and relatives of the rich and the powerful in villages. The level of commitment, skill, knowledge and competence among CPF members in crime prevention activities and in their communications with local police also varied. The relationships between police and CPFs remained highly variable, depending on factors such as the level of commitment and attitudes of individual police officers and the level of commitment and attitudes of local CPF leaders. There were examples of positive working relationships between police and CPFs, including: increased level of informal contacts between police and CPFs; police attendance at CPF meetings, community mobilisation events and training programmes organised by CPFs; improved information-sharing about local crimes and incivilities. There were also many residual obstacles. Some police officers continued to maintain a 'them and us' attitude towards CPFs and remained reactive rather than proactive in dealing with crime and social problems. Finally, police corruption remained a key concern. Indeed, increased police presence in the community may be counterproductive, dangerous even, if officers use their enhanced role and opportunities to harass or extort money from the most vulnerable groups in society.

### **Discussion**

Whether or not community-policing forums can serve as an effective grass root organisation to promote a professional, responsive and accountable police institution in Bangladesh in the long run remains to be seen. Clearly, community policing cannot succeed if it is developed in isolation. Meaningful gender-responsive community policing in urban and rural areas need to be developed



in tandem with a wider police reform strategy aimed at transforming the culture, incentives and practices of the police:

These include human resource issues such as numbers of women police, availability of police in rural areas, increased accountability, rewards and sanctions introduction of pro-poor, women and child-friendly training modules, etc. In the absence of such a parallel strategy – these pilot initiatives will fail to gain momentum and remain stand-alone examples of best practice. (Miles and Sengupta, 2006, p. 35)

In Bangladesh, there is tentative evidence that some senior and frontline police officers have become more responsive to ideas of gender-responsive community policing and community demands. Experiences in the four pilot sites have demonstrated that CPFs that are carefully nurtured rather than imposed from above can offer marginalised groups the social space to make their views known and to develop skills of civic participation, and that female members of local NGOs and community-policing forums have felt empowered by their experiences of participation in crime prevention and collective problem solving. Clearly, local knowledge and sensitivity to local conditions and indigenous practices and local ownership of solutions is the key to success. And where women and the impoverished have never before been engaged in community organising efforts or given meaningful access to justice, policing initiatives that aim to be gender-responsive and community-based must be regarded as positive.

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