

## Executive summary

BRAC has been promoting women's empowerment and more equitable gender relations in the home and in the community as part of its overall development programs for poverty reduction and empowerment of the poor. Specifically, the Gender Quality Action Learning (GQAL) Program for members of Village Organizations (VO) was initiated by Training Division first in 1999 and then later jointly with Research and Evaluation Division (RED) in January 2001 with this aim in mind. In 2005, the Gender Justice & Diversity Section was established in BRAC to facilitate mainstreaming gender equality in the organizational and program level and for advocacy at the national level. Soon afterwards, GQAL was launched with TUP members in Specially Targeted Ultra-Poor (STUP) areas, in response to recommendations made in the Mid-term Report (MTR) of Phase I of Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty-Reduction (CFPR). Inclusion of GQAL activities in 2005 has helped emphasize the importance of changing gender relations at household and community level, including working with men as agents of change along with women.

GQAL has developed a number of strategies to deliver on the above. One has been to identify and train women, men and couples as Gender Justice Educators (GJEs) who commit to changing gender relations and raise voice against gender discrimination and Violence against Women (VAW) within their own homes and also at the community level. Changes at the community level are initiated through the courtyard meetings (*uthan boithaks*) where women and men from the community are encouraged to attend. GJEs normally conduct these meetings

In April 2011, the Gender, Justice & Diversity Section, BRAC requested BRAC Development Institute (BDI) to undertake a research to assess changing gender relations and practices in GQAL areas – particularly changes that had been reported by their field based program officers from several program areas. With this in mind, BDI agreed to undertake a study with the following broad objectives:

- 1) To assess the level of gender equality within households and in the wider community in GQAL program areas, and compare with a similar non-GQAL area.
- 2) To assess the extent to which the wider community mobilizes to take action against gender inequality and violence against women.

The specific objectives were as follows:

- a) To measure the level of practice and attitudes with respect to gender division of labour in the home, domestic violence, gender inequality in terms of healthcare, nutrition and education, and community mobilization around violence against women in the selected areas.

- b) To assess whether specific gender norms with respect to the above have changed in the wider community in the last five years.
- c) To document the ways in which the community has engaged in collective action around practices of gender discrimination and violence, with the aim of identifying different supports and barriers.

The study was designed to assess the possible impact of the GQAL program interventions on actual practices with respect to gender justice and gender based violence within households, perceptions about changing norms and practices among individuals and in the larger communities, and community mobilizations around gender justice and violence against women. To perform the assessment information would be collected from households and the wider communities. In order to ensure a fair regional spread data was collected from three districts – Netrokona, Gaibandha, Rajbari - that, by and large, captured the geographical physical and cultural diversity of rural Bangladesh. In each district information was collected from one well performing ('good') GQAL program area, one 'average' performing ('average') GQAL area and a nearby CFPR area with no GQAL interventions. The 'good' and 'average' GQAL spots would allow comparison between areas with differential program performance. The non-GQAL spot would allow comparison of outcomes between areas with and without GQAL program interventions, and also identify changes in practice regarding gender justice and gender inequality that was driven by non program forces (economic, social, policy related). The fact that all the study areas were former CFPR intervention areas provided a built in control for variation in unobserved factors that might affect the outcomes of interest.

Hence, data were collected from a total of nine spots, three in each district. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used for data collection. The following data collection tools were employed:

1. Random household survey with ever married women in households that had at least one adult male member: 120 household interviews using short pre-coded questionnaire in each spot
2. Key informant interviews (KII)
3. Focus Group Discussions (FGD)
4. Field observations

Sixty two key informant interviews were carried out with BRAC Staff and community members, including school teachers, *imams*, marriage registrars, *Gram Daridro Bimochon Committee* (GDBC) members and Union Parishad (UP) members (male/female). Four FGDs were held in each of the 6 'good' and 'average' spots with elite men, elite women, GJE men and women and TUP women. Three FGDs were carried out in the 3 non-GQAL spots as there are no GJEs there. Hence, the total number of FGDs was 33. Elite male participants of FGDs were service holders, businessmen, UP members, *muezzin*, *imam*, farmers, teachers, *shalishdars*, *matbors*, while elite women were NGO workers, teachers, family planning workers, and wives of elite men.

## Outcomes

Outcomes to measure actual practice and perception regarding gender justice and gender based violence were identified according to four themes based upon the gender quality index developed by the program, and using selected indicators from those identified by the program. The broad themes were:

- Gender role changes at the household level
- Reduction in domestic violence
- Increased community mobilization against VAW
- Equitable access to healthcare and nutrition

## Major findings

### *Impact of GQAL program*

1. There is a strong association between presence of the GQAL program and the outcomes of interest. There are significant difference in outcomes between ‘good’ GQAL and non-GQAL areas, and in some cases there are also differences in outcomes between ‘good’ and ‘average’ performing GQAL program areas.
2. The most visible effect of GQAL program appears to be in changing perceptions and attitudes regarding gender roles in the household (less in altering actual practice), increasing access to healthcare and nutrition and in efforts at community mobilization around VAW. However, the issue of sexuality and the relationship with violence is not explicitly addressed.
3. The observed changes were relatively greater in TUP and Gender Justice Educator households than among the elite households.
4. There is variation by performance of GQAL program with regard to community mobilization against VAW. In ‘good’ performing GQAL areas, successful community initiatives were in the form of collective action against early marriage, spousal abuse, and sexual harassment, while in non-GQAL areas, community mobilization around VAW was viewed only in terms of the community conducting a *shalish* on a VAW incident. Additionally, in GQAL areas these collective actions involved a variety of actors including youth clubs, school committees, and community elite, suggesting the capacity of GJEs to mobilize other actors in the community.
5. While women in all study areas were equally likely to engage in income generating activities, women in ‘good’ performing GQAL areas who received assets under the TUP program were more likely to report improvement in various dimensions of women’s status, in their self confidence as well as in gender relations at home, compared to income earning women in non-GQAL areas.

6. There is also regional variation in several outcomes that appears to be related to contextual factors, which have been identified below.

### **Possible factors influencing GQAL performance**

The variation in GQAL program performance (i.e. difference in observed outcomes between 'good' and 'average' GQAL areas) is related to two factors: capacity of program staff at the field level to mobilize the broader community and their responsiveness, and the context in which the program operates. More specifically these factors are:

1. Committed and skilled individual staff

Skill and commitment of the GQAL staff in establishing relationship with the community at different levels is one of the key factors in determining the success of GQAL program. In particular, their ability to respond to situations where an intervention is necessary (for instance, stopping early marriage, mediating/negotiating changes in gendered practices), ability to engage and motivate people to change as well as to demonstrate changes through their own practices were critical.

2. Capacity to mobilize elite interest and involvement

Elite interest and involvement makes a significant difference in the effectiveness of the GQAL program, as many of the desired outcomes depend at the very least on the tacit or sometimes visible support of the elite as well as their leadership roles.

3. Capacity to engage other civil society actors

The presence of active civil society bodies such as school committees, youth clubs, etc also play a strong supportive role and contributes to the characterization of a 'good GQAL spot.' The involvement of the youth is particularly effective as change in gender roles and norms when initiated by the youth have a greater chance of sustainability.

4. Presence of other rights-based/women's empowerment organizations

The presence and activities of other organizations mobilizing and campaigning around rights or women's empowerment, strengthens learning and application of that learning from GQAL. It is the multiplicity and the intensity of the campaigns from these different sources that may account for the better performance of GQAL programs in certain areas and for regional differences in the success of the program.

5. Broader community characteristics

The underlying economic, social and political characteristics of the community can shape both the effectiveness of the program and desired outcomes either positively or negatively. For example, strict class divisions and lack of social cohesion between classes may subvert or impede GQAL interventions that promote economic empowerment of or

attitudinal changes towards poor working women. The infrastructure or access to different types of resources (education, health, work, etc.) can also have an impact on the performance of the GQAL program.

### **Possible factors that influence gender equality outcomes in non-GQAL areas**

The general change in gender equality outcomes observed in non-GQAL areas have to do with a number of factors that operate at a macro level, and hence influence either positively, sometimes negatively, the types of outcomes aimed by the GQAL program. These include:

#### **1. BRAC programs**

BRAC programs particularly those relating to education, maternal health and nutrition, social development programs such as Community Empowerment Programmes (CEP) and other awareness raising programs as well as legal aid programs have an impact in and of themselves.

#### **2. Government programs**

Government policies relating to education, health, income generating projects, particularly in terms of creating greater access to health and education, providing stipends, safety net measures, creating work opportunities for poor women and awareness raising campaigns against gender based discriminations and relating to laws is an important driver of change and one that is recognized and widely accepted by community members.

#### **3. Laws**

Greater awareness on laws relating to marriage, divorce, polygamy, harassment and perceived stricter implementation of such laws is seen to have an effect of bringing about slow but tangible changes in the ways people negotiate around these problems.

#### **4. Media**

Mass media (TV, radio, 'dish') has become one of the most important and effective conduits to changing gender norms and practices. Not only is it a platform for government and non-government organizations to air their campaigns, social messaging through dramas or even simply the exposure to different ways of thinking, being and practicing broadens the horizon of reference against which people assess attitudes and actions practiced in their communities. Therefore, access to media is a powerful factor in bringing about change.

#### **5. General increase in level of education**

The overall level of education in the community makes a difference in the kinds of attitudes and behaviours practiced in the community.

## 6. Increase in women's economic opportunities

Overall, economic opportunities and particularly access to women's economic opportunities is one of the most important premises for changes in gender norms and practices. Women who engage in income generation and have control over their income have the potential to act as the initiators for change in gender relations. Both government and non-government agencies are playing a crucial role in taking initiatives that create work opportunities for women.

## 7. Mobility and exposure

The increasing mobility of people internally within the country and the trend of international migration is exposing people to a wide variety of norms and practices particularly in relation to women. These are being adopted at the local level to recreate gender norms and practices, thereby creating change.

## Recommendations

1. The GJEs are the cornerstone of the program and investment in their training is crucial to strengthen GQAL programs across program areas. Hence, we strongly recommend that greater emphasis be placed on raising capacity of GQAL staff on building commitment and establishing relationships with the community (e.g. greater emphasis on developing skills on facilitation, motivation and interpersonal communication).
2. GQAL program should be cognizant of the commonalities between women of different social classes with respect to the barriers to seeking justice. This should be addressed in the design of program interventions to build social cohesion so that elite women who face similar problems as the poor are not excluded and can be mobilized more effectively and systematically.
3. The GQAL program should give sufficient attention to the particularities of the context of the community if the program is considering scaling up. The delivery mechanism of the program needs to be flexible in order to adjust to local conditions such as the nature of elite involvement, nature of civil society, social cohesion, and given a certain degree of autonomy at the local level to recognize and address these factors. For example, greater collaboration with existing school committees/youth clubs, or effective activation of such bodies, perhaps through technical assistance could have a significant impact in the operationalization of the program (See Box 2).
4. Given that gender norms and practices have been changing, monitoring indicators used by the GQAL program need to be re-thought and narrowed down. For example under indicator one (gender role changes at the household level) the indices "holds children to lap" and "gossips with wife and children in leisure time" are practices that have become common place and are no longer significant in indicating changes. Under indicator three (increased community mobilization against domestic violence) the index "sends both boys

and girls to school” and under indicator four (more gender equitable access to health care and nutrition) the index “all members of family take meal together at least once a day” are also common place practices.

5. One issue that GQAL does not address is that of sexuality though it addresses violence and abuse, the nature of which is often sexual. This is an area that cannot be ignored if GQAL is serious about bringing lasting change in gender relations especially within the household.
6. The fact that many of the GQAL participants may be adolescents living adult lives should be recognized by the program. Now that BRAC is in the process of drafting a strategy to work more effectively with adolescents, it would be an opportunity to address issues of gender, discrimination, etc for that age group through the GJE.
7. We would strongly recommend that the relationship between the GQAL program and the TUP program be explored thoroughly (whether there is a direction of causality or if it is the case of a virtuous cycle), which could help strengthen and complement both programmatic interventions. GQAL program should be mainstreamed within BRAC and other BRAC program staff should be provided with GQAL training that would greatly increase the effectiveness of program interventions, particularly those related to social and human development, human rights, and women’s economic and political empowerment. For instance, with GQAL training, *Shasthyo Karmis* (SK) and *Shasthyo Shebikas* (SS) under the BRAC Health Programme (BHP) program, who already have easy and regular access to households can deliver messages regarding gender discriminations in health and nutrition, can monitor health and nutrition practices and strengthen GQAL interventions. In the study areas, CEP was found undertaking certain actions that resonate with objectives and outcomes targeted by the GQAL program. Their activities were particularly evident in the non-GQAL areas, although in a less clearly defined and articulated manner. The role of the CEP should be strengthened by giving them GQAL training in non-GQAL areas, or through closer collaboration of CEP with GQAL, where both programs exist. This type of collaboration between BRAC programs is happening in ad hoc manner in many places but needs official recognition in order to scale up. GQAL may also consider ‘tracking’ a number of GQAL educators from various backgrounds – TUP, SS, CEP to understand more deeply the drivers of change and causality.
8. There are noticeable synergies with other NGOs in the study areas, which may be one of the factors positively affecting the performance of GQAL in these areas. It may be worth exploiting these synergies to initiate further interaction, strengthen and complement program interventions. For example, key informants and FGD participants mentioned the awareness raising programs around gender roles of Swabolombi and Shathi and plays by Ashar Alo, legal awareness programs under Swabolombi, BNWLA and MJF or the health and nutrition programs of Swabolombi, Poppy, VARD, PROSHIKA, NIDP, Shathi and TMSS.

9. TUP members in ‘good GQAL spots’ were more likely to perceive that they were able to use TUP assets successfully to earn an income and bring changes in their living standards. However, whether it is the fact that respondents in areas where GQAL was successful are better able to manage their assets or whether it is the outcome of a successful TUP program, where improvements in peoples’ economic status enabled greater incorporation of GQAL values and practices, needs to be further explored.