AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT HATE SPEECH, RELIGIOUS HARMONY, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH: A CASE REVIEW FROM BANGLADESH

Project title: "Shanti Moshal" (trans. Peace Torch)
Central focus: Countering hate speech among women, youth, and religious groups
Country/region: Bangladesh
Grant amount: 5,000 EUR
Date of approval: November 2020
Closing date: July 2021
Main activities: Online workshop, quiz competition, short video contest, and income generating means distribution
Three lessons:

1. Education and training are pivotal tools to raise awareness about hate speech, mis/disinformation, and mental/physical health.

2. It is important to engage more comprehensively with religious leaders and rural women on emerging issues of hate speech, marginalization on digital spaces, and psychosocial health.

3. Creative approaches to raise awareness such as quiz competitions and short film contests that leverage social media networks can be highly effective, particularly during lockdowns.

INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGE

Major public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic often highlight existing inequalities and marginalization in the society. Prevailing evidence and emerging trends show that particular social groups such as women and girls, religious minorities, marginalized youth, and people living in hard-to-reach areas experience the effects of the pandemic in more negative ways than others who live in more favored areas. Therefore, identifying and understanding how the pandemic affects particular social groups can not only help raise the effectiveness of containment and vaccination efforts but also minimize potential negative impacts. However, little solid information is available about how different groups will be affected by pandemic situations and how they might respond to and recover from these circumstances. It is clear, nonetheless, that communications of many kinds play crucial roles in positive and negative responses, planned and unplanned.

The distinctive roles of women and youth, as well as the various entities which support them, deserve particular attention. Religious actors play especially significant yet often poorly understood roles in responding to the pandemic emergencies. The European Union funded AHA! Project has directly supported 50 small grants in South Asia to groups that aim to address these facets of the COVID-19 crisis.

The case review series draws primarily on this experience, with the goal both to provide narratives to help in understanding diverse situations and to explore the experience, under several programs supported by AHA! Project grants. The current review highlights an integrative approach to raise positive awareness among vulnerable rural women, religious leaders, and youth in Bangladesh through the AHA! grantee Sanjida Haq's project, called "Shanti Moshal" (trans. Peace Torch). Its goal is to highlight how youth leaders like Sanjida can make meaningful contributions to Bangladesh's overall efforts to contain the virus by engaging participants from vulnerable groups, utilizing a blended approach of online and offline communication strategies.

BANGLADESH'S VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AND THE COVID-19 CRISES

Bangladesh offers inspiration and challenges for policymakers and development practitioners. Impressive income growth, human development progress (both education and health), and programs aiming to reduce vulnerability stand out, all in the face of extraordinary development challenges. However, large segments of the population still fall under the national poverty line (20.5% according to 2019 data).[1] The COVID-19 crisis has both upended much progress and highlighted and accentuated new vulnerabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to sharp increases in overall poverty rates. A study conducted by the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) indicated that extreme poverty[2] increased from 9.4% in 2018 to 28.5% in 2020, and the overall poverty rate doubled, to 42% in 2020.[3] A survey of UNDP beneficiaries found that 44% of households had become newly poor since the start of the pandemic, due to layoffs and industry shutdowns.[4] Impacts were worst among temporary workers, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and female-headed households.[5] Despite the risks of disease, low-wage earners have had little choice but to continue in their roles, contending both the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic that curtailed opportunities and cut into savings and other defenses against poverty.

The COVID-19 emergencies is set in the context of complex patterns of poverty and programs aimed to address them. Specific categories and communities, for example the impoverished elderly, disabled, or young orphaned people, as well as widowed or destitute women and impoverished mothers, often fall disproportionately under the extreme poor category. Their challenges have been amplified during the COVID-19 emergencies. The effects of poverty and other social factors on historically marginalized communities such as rural and female-headed households, floating populations like the Bede communities, and the third-gender communities like Hijras, are accentuated by poor access to any existing social safety nets, and deprivation of social and legal rights. Millions of city residents live in crowded, unsanitary conditions, as do over one million Rohingya people from neighboring Myanmar. Compounding these challenges are the mounting effects of ecological volatility due to climate change that threatens the future of millions of people living in vulnerable areas.

Social tensions, conflicts, and community violence are linked both to perceptions and realities of poverty and to inequalities. Social cleavages and strong group-based identities heighten the potential for—and incidence of—deadly conflict especially within communities. Some 89% of Bangladesh's population is Muslim, with a large Hindu minority (10%) and smaller communities of Buddhists and Christians. The last decade has seen a troubling rise in hate speech and violent attacks, notably by Islamic extremists.[6] Outbreaks of large-scale sectarian violence have occurred periodically: during the 2021 Hindu Durga Puja festival, for instance, social media rumors and incitement led to deadly mob violence against the Hindu community. These incidents were at least indirectly linked to pressures from the COVID-19 emergencies. Ethnic, religious, and gender minorities endure scapegoating and hostile rhetoric. The COVID-19 crisis has aggravated such problems, which were already showing worrying signs of increase in pre-crisis years. More positively, religious leaders such as Imams have been actively engaged in social development projects in Bangladesh for decades and are a backbone of social stability in the country.[7] They have broad and interconnected networks and are highly regarded in the country by their respective communities. They often play a crucial role in shaping opinions regarding social issues and norms. Leveraging their strong networking and communication skills, religious leaders are combating misinformation against COVID-19 and delivering critical information among their followers in Bangladesh.[8]

1 https://www.adb.org/countries/bangladesh/poverty#accordion-0-0

2 The World Bank defines The World Bank defines "extreme poverty" as living on less than $1.90 per person per day

3 https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/economy/2021/01/24/extreme-poverty-trebled-in-2020

4 https://www.undp.org/news/rich-and-poor-divide-set-widen-if-pandemic-impact-runs-unabated-new-un-report-says

5 https://www.undp.org/publications/addressing-covid-19s-uneven-impacts-vulnerable-populations-bangladesh-case-shock, p. 4.

6 https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/, https://www.prio.org/data, https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard

7 https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/stories/religious-leaders-play-key-role-battle-against-covid-19

8 ibid

Youth (between the ages of 15-24 years) in Bangladesh comprises about 20% of the total population of 160 million. The psychosocial, educational, and economic impacts of the pandemic have negatively affected many of them.[9] The extended closure of educational institutions as a result of the pandemic presents major long term as well as immediate challenges (the latter include mental health strains). Bangladesh's schools remained closed for the longest time in Bangladesh (compared to other countries), deepening the existing learning crisis. Availability of quality learning and teaching materials, teacher trainings, as well as gaps in digital connectivity accentuate these challenges.

The crisis accentuates, directly and indirectly, numerous other problems that affect young people. These include the extended effects of malnutrition (Bangladeshi children have high malnutrition rates).[10] Child labor, common in both rural and urban settings, appears to be on the rise because of the tolls on the economy caused by pandemic induced lockdown and closures. Youth and children from low-income families work in hazardous conditions such as the construction and transportation sectors, waste-picking, and other unregulated formal and informal sectors.[11] Young girls, already vulnerable to child marriage (which can also affect young boys), teenage pregnancy, gender-biased sex selection, and violence, are even more affected during the pandemic.[12]

Young people globally have been highly susceptible to the "infodemic" from the beginning of the pandemic. Existing digital divides and lack of digital literacy remain two major challenges that lead to mis/disinformation, denial, and violence. Furthermore, unemployment rates among 15-24 years old populations in Bangladesh have been measured at 12 to13% in 2019.[13] Since many young people have lost their jobs due to the pandemic, the unemployment rate is likely to soar. This in turn is likely to increase the risk of crimes, drug addiction, and mental disorders.

SHANTI MOSHAL'S INTEGRATED APPROACH TO RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT COVID-19 AMONG VULNERABLE POPULATIONS IN BANGLADESH

Shanti Moshal is a youth-led initiative that promotes empathy, self-reliance, mental and physical health awareness, and social cohesion, through creative outreach activities and education. The project aimed to engage participants from women's, girls', youth, and religious groups. Sanjida, the project lead, and a youth leader herself, observes, "Shanti Moshal wants to spread peace in every part of the country. That's why the project targets several types of people from several communities. It is not possible to remove unawareness by working with a particular community."[14] Thus, she contends, a multi-faceted approach is essential. Through education, trainings, dialogues, social media campaigns, and income generating activities, Shanti Moshal has equipped a diverse group of women, men, and youth to combat hate and build peace in their communities, using both online and offline platforms.

9 Md. Abdullah Saeed Khan, Sourav Debnath, Md. Shahnoor Islam, Susmita Zaman, Noor-E- Ambia, Anindita Das Barshan, Mohammad Sorowar Hossain, Tamanna Tabassum, Monjur Rahman, Mohammad Jahid Hasan, Mental health of young people amidst COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh, Heliyon, Volume 7, Issue 6, 2021, e07173, ISSN 2405-8440, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07173.

10 Rahman, M., Rahman, M., Maniruzzaman, M., & Howlader, M. (2020). Prevalence of undernutrition in Bangladeshi children. Journal of Biosocial Science, 52(4), 596-609. doi:10.1017/S0021932019000683

11 https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1669/rr-2

12 https://www.generationunlimited.org/stories/impact-covid-19-young-people

13 https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/BGD/bangladesh/youth-unemployment-rate

14 Direct quote from a data collection activity through the AHA! project. Data accessed on 10/18/2021

As a first step towards combating hate speech, misinformation, and intolerance, Shanti Moshal organized four online workshops centered on the following topics:

Emerging hate speech in Bangladesh- scenario, effects, and way forward.

Fighting against misinformation during COVID-19: role of youth, women, and religious leaders.

Role of youth to stop misinformation and hate speech.

Online hate speech on women: Causes, effects, and way forward

These events were livestreamed on Facebook to reach a wider audience. This led to vibrant discussions on topics that are not often discussed in Bangladesh. The workshops were well-attended (3,200 total views, 25-35 comments, and 10-15 comments per workshop) by both male and female audiences, mostly between 25-35 years of age.

Shanti Moshal also organized a week-long quiz competition on International Women's Day 2021 and a short video contest leveraging their social media page on Facebook. The quiz competition aimed to increase positive outlooks towards women by highlighting women's contribution to addressing existing gender-based discrimination in the society. The event aroused great enthusiasm among youth, exemplified in the 1,059 total comments, more than 200 likes, and 150 shares. Most of the participants were between age 18-26 and female.

The video contest was open to all and based on pre-selected peacebuilding themes, such as the role of youth in peacebuilding, awareness of the risks of cyber-bullying, awareness about COVID-19, religious harmony, and gender equality. Submitted videos were uploaded on the project's Facebook page and were open for engagement. Three of the best films were viewed between 587 and 1,600 times. Sanjida organized an in-person showing of the films at the Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, which was also well-attended. Both the quiz competition and the short film contest generated enthusiasm for understanding critical peacebuilding issues, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They allowed people to engage creatively with these issues.

Figure 1 Shanti Moshal's in-person workshop with rural women in Jamalpur, Bangladesh (August 13, 2021)

In addition to online awareness-raising activities, Shanti Moshal organized several in-person programs with rural women and religious leaders. Activities included conducting interactive workshops on physical and mental health issues among rural women in Jamalpur, offering sewing equipment among disabled and destitute women to generate income, and distributing sanitary toolkits among women. Shanti Moshal also organized a seminar with rural youth and religious leaders on July 2, 2021. Representative from Muslim and Hindu communities were invited to discuss what each religion says about religious harmony, religious perspectives about spreading mis/disinformation, and Dos and Don'ts during a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The project directly reached 55 women, youth, and religious leaders from impoverished rural areas of Jamalpur district of Bangladesh.

LESSONS AND TAKEAWAYS

Shanti Moshal faced roadblocks and challenges during the project's implementation phase. Speaking about women's health, particularly mental health, is affected by social stigma and is often brushed off in rural Bangladesh. Project lead Sanjida noted, in responding to research questions, that her female workshop participants initially did not take the theme seriously and laughed at the topic. However, after explaining the importance of both physical and mental wellbeing during the pandemic, participants were able to relate the topics to their daily lives and were willing to listen. She experienced backlash from a religious leader who declined to speak at a workshop if female participants were present, but she was able to convince him by citing references from the religious texts. Participants from online workshops often asked "irrelevant" questions to the religious leaders, which the host and guest had to tackle with patience and factual answers.

The project highlights three successful principles and elements that peacebuilders in other contexts can learn from:

- Education and training are pivotal tools to raise awareness about hate speech, mis/disinformation, and mental/physical health. Shanti Moshal's focus on media and psychosocial health literacy and awareness-raising activities (both on and offline) engaged participants from multiple social and age groups from both urban and rural settings who expressed their appreciation about the role of education and training.

- The challenges that Shanti Moshal faced during the implementation phase highlight the importance and necessity to engage more comprehensively with religious leaders and rural women on emerging issues of hate speech, marginalization on digital spaces, and psychosocial health. Mental health related stigma makes caregiving difficult particularly in rural areas, with misogyny rampant among conservative religious leaders. Projects like Shanti Moshal that solely depend on social entrepreneurs like Sanjida's social network and communication skills need to be scaled up to cover more semi-urban and rural areas.

- Creative approaches to raise awareness such as quiz competitions and short film contests that leverage social media networks can be highly effective, particularly during lockdowns. Special efforts are needed to be made to reach broader audiences. One option would be to encourage and facilitate participation in national and international level campaigns such as the Global Youth Film Festival, International Children's Film Festival Bangladesh, and the Bangladesh Short Film and Docu Fest.

The project context was especially difficult. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the fragility of a cohesive social contract that was already under strain in Bangladesh. Trends towards discrimination and division in Bangladeshi society make peacebuilding efforts a daunting task, especially in the digital realm, where it can be hard to break through the noise of viral content and sensationalism. Hate speech, misogyny, and marginalization are pervasive, and COVID-19 has exacerbated isolation and social fragmentation. Interventions like Shanti Moshal point the way towards effective integrated approaches to combatting hate speech among women, youth, and religious groups.

Figure 2 Shanti Moshal's in-person workshop with rural religious leaders in Jamalpur, Bangladesh (July 2, 2021)