

COALITION AND NETWORKING

Since its inception in 1994, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) has envisioned ensuring greater access to justice for the poor, marginalized and excluded segments of the society. To this end, BLAST has been rendering free legal services to the poor and disadvantaged through legal aid, counseling, or *Shalish* (traditional method of mediation) and public interest litigation. Besides, it is also aiming towards legal empowerment of its beneficiaries through enhancing awareness about the knowledge and use of law so that they have better control over their lives and assets. BLAST is also striving towards reforming and expanding access to institutions associated with dispensation of justice through policy advocacy, sensitization and awareness campaigns, civil society mobilization as well as researches and publications about the impediments within the legal systems which tend to deter and deprive poor and indigent people from seeking legal redress.

To realize its goal for establishment of a judicial system that is accessible, equitable, effective and efficient to all including the poor and disadvantaged, BLAST collaborates with different stakeholders and groups at the local, national and regional level. Through experience and insight gained over the years, BLAST has recognized the need to develop linkages and relationships with development NGOs, women rights organizations, local elites, local media, local government representatives (i.e. Union Parishad Chairmen and female members) for effectively intervening at the grassroots level. Accordingly, the organization convene networking, advocacy and discussion meetings through its eighteen unit offices with the above mentioned organizations and individuals with the purpose of enlarging the scope of the grassroots to participate in formulation of laws and policies which have a bearing on their lives and assets. Linkages with the groups and individuals representing the interest of the poor have resulted in referrals of a significant number of cases for *Shalish* and litigation to BLAST from the village level as well as remote areas where it has no effective presence. Interaction with these groups and individuals has also provided an opportunity to the grassroots for voicing their concerns relating to legal as well as gender issues through a collective forum which, in turn, has enabled BLAST to address their legal challenges with the lawyers, lower judiciary, magistrates, police officers and other justice-related institutions. Again, successful networking with the local media has resulted in referrals of cases relating to gross violation fundamental rights violations to BLAST that were followed by investigations, legal action and advocacy undertaken by BLAST both severally and jointly with other organizations in many instances.

Networking at the local level has drawn the attention of BLAST to many sensitive and covert issues which include rape, domestic violence, custodial violence and the problems within the traditional *Shalish* mechanism that is fraught with male bias and less poor friendly ways. It has also prompted BLAST to take on more responsibilities for the future including expanding its outreach to remote areas for imparting legal training and awareness to the grassroots people as well as to local-level judicial institutions enabling them to become more accessible, gender and poor friendly. Dialogue with the law enforcement agencies has already made a positive impact. BLAST is gradually assuming a key role in relationship building between the service providers (justice- related institutions) and beneficiaries (service-seekers). Given that BLAST has a very strong linkage with bar associations across the country; cases referred by BLAST are attended to with more seriousness and commitment by the law enforcement agencies that have provided some respite to victims of rape and domestic violence in remote places. On account of growing linkages with justice-related institutions, there are also instances in which the lower judiciary has referred a number of individuals to BLAST for settling their disputes through *Shalish*.

Under its main project entitled “Access to Justice for Realization of Human Rights and Advocacy for the Empowerment of the Poor”, BLAST collaborates with the following organizations through a formal M o U:

- CARE in Dinajpur (legal awareness and support to impoverished clients based on referrals made to BLAST);
- Nij Adhikar in Satkhira (providing legal assistance on the basis of referrals);
- TARA in Dhaka (providing legal support to children);
- EPEC in Khagrachari (providing legal assistance on the basis of referrals);
- Lighthouse in Bogra (providing legal support and imparting legal training to community police).

Besides, BLAST has a formal network with twelve partner NGOs operating in twelve districts of Bangladesh through the unit offices of BLAST under its Gender, Knowledge, Networking and Human Rights Interventions in Bangladesh (GKNHRIB) project. The purpose of this networking is to develop the capacity of its partner NGOs to supervise justice related programs at the village level including *Shalish*; promoting and improving justice seeking behavior of rural women by collaborating with local elites, community leaders and Union Parishad members; making the traditional *Shalish* more gender and poor friendly through creation of more women *Shalishkars* (mediators) at the village level and ensuring greater participation of women. The network partners include:

- ❑ Ghashful in Chittagong;
- ❑ Seba Manobik Unnoyon Kendra in Comilla;
- ❑ Jubo Academy in Sylhet;
- ❑ People's Development Foundation in Pirojpur;
- ❑ Bikolpo Unnoyon Kendra in Barisal;
- ❑ Action Aid Development in Jhenaidah;
- ❑ Nagorik Uddyog in Tangail;
- ❑ Sangjog (Connection) in Rajbari;
- ❑ Sabuj Palli Unnoyon Sangstha in Kushtia;
- ❑ Sagorika in Noakhali;
- ❑ Dipti in Jessore and
- ❑ Come to Work in Dinajpur.

Given BLAST has also engaged in securing social and economic justice to the unorganized and the powerless through filing public interest litigation, it also collaborates with the following organizations amongst others, at the national level through informal issue-based networking:

- Ain-O-Shalish- Kendra (ASK);
- Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA);
- Karmojibi Nari (KN);
- Mahila Parishad (MP);
- Bangladesh Society for enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR);
- Nijera Kori (NK);
- Odhikar;
- Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA);
- Save the Children, (SCF), UK;
- Samata;
- Action Aid;
- American Solidarity Center;
- Oxfam.

The range of issues for collective action include conducting joint investigations on sensitive issues of rights violations; formulating legal and advocacy responses to public interest litigation concerning forced eviction of slum dwellers and the landless; challenging gender discrimination in public employment; challenging wholesale, arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention by law enforcement agencies; unlawful incarceration of juveniles and foreign prisoners; seeking wider interpretation of right to life to include

right to shelter, livelihood, water, sanitation and healthy living conditions; securing compensation to the victims of accidents within the garments industry; ensuring rehabilitation of the landless and indigenous groups; enhancing legal awareness of poor garments workers and protecting their employment rights and securing their dues; and lobbying for law reform in relation to laws as well as practices those are discriminatory and repressive against the poor, disadvantaged and the women in particular.

In conclusion, few success stories following collective action taken by BLAST and its networking partners are briefly described below:

- An out of court settlement arrived at following a writ filed by BLAST, ASK and BNWLA which prompted the Health Directorate to delete a gender discriminatory advertisement notice for employment in the position of health assistants and publish fresh advertisements calling for applications from otherwise qualified and competent male and female candidates or holding examinations on a non-gender discriminatory basis. This public interest litigation has set a precedent to be followed in future in the context of gender discrimination in public employment;
- Pursuant to successful public interest litigation filed by BLAST, ASK challenging arbitrary arrests and unreasonable exercise of the power of remand by law enforcement agencies, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh issued a fifteen point directives to be complied by the police officers and magistrates in relation to arrest, detention and treatment of suspects;
- BLAST, ASK and others have on a number of occasions moved the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh through public interest litigation challenging forced eviction of slum dwellers that has resulted in stay orders restraining eviction which in turn has protected their right to life and livelihood and prompted the concerned government authorities to incorporate provisions for rehabilitation of slum dwellers in the draft National Housing Policy, 2004. Persistent legal action brought by BLAST, ASK and others have led the High Court to give a wider interpretation to the fundamental human right to life to include right to livelihood, housing and shelter.

Networking with regional NGOs: Over the years BLAST has experienced the need to develop linkages and relationships with regional partners on cross-border human rights issues including illegal migration, trafficking and repatriation of foreign prisoners most of whom languish in the jails of different countries owing to their impoverished status. The print media has brought to the attention of BLAST the hapless and agonizing stories of many poor Bangladeshi fishermen whose trawlers driven through turbulent weather have landed in the territorial waters of India and are now languishing in the Indian prisons. The situation warranted reciprocal arrangements with legal aid NGOs in the sub continent for ensuring release and repatriation of indigent and helpless foreign nationals. In recent times, BLAST has entered into a formal partnership with the Legal Aid and Services West Bengal (LASWEB) in India; Pakistan Women Lawyers Association (PAWLA); and Kathmandu School of Law (KSL) and Pro Public in Nepal to this end.