Talking things through: achieving increased harmony and reduced violence in a rural household in Bangladesh

USAID/FFP has funded CARE Bangladesh to implement SHOUHARDO III, a food security program designed to achieve gender equitable food and nutrition security and resilience for poor and extreme poor households living in Char and Haor regions of Northern Bangladesh. The program operates in eight districts, providing participant households with skills to improve production and incomes, achieve better health outcomes for women and children, improve community capacities to cope with and respond to disasters, achieve women’s empowerment, and increase the responsiveness of government to public service needs.

In Bangladesh, domestic violence is a major social issue. According to Bangladeshi Bureau of Statistics (2011), 87 per cent of Bangladeshi married women are abused by their husbands. This violence affects women’s physical, mental and social well-being while simultaneously reducing their productivity and ability to raise healthy children. This increases the economic and social cost of the violence, making it a priority issue to be addressed by development and social justice actors and governments.

Jorina and Khudu, an auto-rickshaw driver, have three sons and one daughter. They were married when Jorina was only 12 years old. Despite being a good wife to him and a good mother to their children, Khudu never trusted Jorina. He was always very suspicious about her ability to remain faithful if she was exposed to other men away from the homestead and also on how wise her spending habits would be. In addition any expenses she incurred always raised suspicions as he thought she was trying to swindle him by indicating that items cost more than she said. He would beat her for simply talking to their neighbors; it was as if Jorina did not have the right to enjoy anything. She could not socialize unless permitted by her husband, including necessary trips to the market. It was only when SHOUHADO III’s EKATA was formed in their village that Jorina was able to communicate her reason and needs to step out of the house.

Jorina and Khudu’s family were registered as participants of SHOUHARDO III program in July 2016 and began receiving program support in both livelihood and health interventions. It was during this time that Jorina also joined the EKATA women’s solidarity group in her village. Soon after the EKATA sessions started, Jorina told the program staff about her situation. She would cry while recalling the
times that she was physically beaten by her husband, and recognizing how it has affected her wellbeing. The worst part was that she never did him wrong and was always supportive of him. The neighbors also tried to discuss the issue with Khudu to solve their problem but they failed.

After four months of persuasion by Jorina’s female colleagues in the EKATA group, Khudu agreed to attend a couple’s dialogue event hosted by the program. There were 15 other couples from the village who participated in the sessions, giving Khudu the opportunity to meet them and see how harmonious and trustful their relationships were. It was then that he realized, for the first time, that he was doing wrong to his wife. Both Khudu and Jorina learned that it is not possible to achieve an ideal relationship without their joint efforts. After regularly attending the sessions, Khudu committed to not beat his wife anymore and to consult her for any household decision making. Soon thereafter, as communication increased, Jorina, for the first time, gathered enough courage to suggest that she wanted to contribute to the family’s income.

Khudu cultivated maize supported by the program; and at one point, had to go to Dhaka for a family emergency leaving Jorina to look after his crops. Jorina took over attending the FFBS sessions, quickly catching up on the sessions she had not participated in. For two months when she was in charge with all effort and energies, the maize plot flourished. Khudu was amazed to see how things turned out with his plot after he returned. When the program staffs visited the couple at home she proudly explained, “I exerted efforts to grow the maize based on what I was learning”. That first season they earned BDT 7,000 (USD 85) monthly. Looking at the status of the farm this season, even more income is anticipated. She concludes “I am happy that I contributed to my family and gained my husband’s trust. The dialogues helped increase communication in our marriage and in working together we are increasing our incomes. Jorina is now mostly in charge of the input purchase and sales from the farm as her husband seeks to find other sources of income for the family through wage labor during the downtimes of his auto-rickshaw trade.

Jorina, as well as the neighbors, were surprised by Khudu’s change. Jorina is now able to visit her parents or neighbors without seeking permission. Khudu has begun helping her with household chores including cooking, child care and rearing livestock; and in return, Jorina helps her husband with his agricultural activities. They take many decisions together and as a result are now living a happily married life in Mohammadpur village.