

Annual Report 2023-2024

A. Project Summary of RIB :

1. Project Title : Transformation towards ecological and gender justice and sustainability

Funded by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS)

Purpose of the Project: To promote social transformation towards ecological and gender justice, equity and sustainability.

Target Group(s): Small Farmers, women farmers, youths and students, members of peasant organisations concerned government authorities, GO/NGOs, political actors, and left actors and activists and academics working in the field of agriculture.

Geographical Area : Bogura, Satkhira and Dhaka in Bangladesh

2. Project Title: Advancing Accountability & Transparency through the Right to Information

Funded by National Endowment for Democracy (NED)

Background and activities

The current project was initiated with an objective to advance accountability and transparency through the application and implementation of right to information mechanisms. The methodology used to achieve above objective was 1. Orientation and strategic planning of the RTI moderators and participatory research groups. 2. Trainings for multi-stakeholder groups and representatives of participatory research groups. 3. Expansion of a functional dialogue structure between RTI moderators/defenders, action research groups and multi-stakeholders including government authorities. 4. Advocacy and awareness events 5. Documentation of results 6. Learning, dissemination and sharing

Through the current grant we sought to study the procedural and social aspects of implementation of Right to Information (RTI) Act in Bangladesh by generating applications from conscious citizen and general public so that applications are tracked, followed through and analyzed in order to learn more about the implementation of RTI from a peoples' perspective.

Geographical locations: (1) Nilphamari district – Sadar + Saidpur Upazila (2) Dinajpur district – Sadar upazila (3) Dhaka (4) Moulvibazar – Sadar + Rajnagar Upazila

Groups and people engaged under the project:

a) **Action researchers** - 4 Action Research groups with 25 members in each were formed. These action researchers were selected from community level and were mostly women, men, tea workers, wage earners, farmers, home makers, community leaders, school teachers and so on.

This group mainly focused on identifying their day to day issues adopting PAR method in the process and accordingly submitted RTI request as and where it was felt necessary to address their challenges.

b) RTI Moderators – 3 RTI Moderator groups with 30 members in each were formed. These RTI Moderators were selected from socially aware citizens. The group members comprising of lawyers, college teachers, social, women and cultural activists, civil society members, journalists, former elected representatives, entrepreneurs, human rights defenders, representatives from theme-based organizations and so on. These groups were responsible to focus on larger issues that affects public interests.

c) Student groups - 6 student groups from colleges in the working districts, with 20 students in each were formed. These student groups were formed with a mandate to focus on issues that surrounds student community and education sectors. Selected students were responsible to spread knowledge on RTI law among fellow students and their peers.

d) Volunteers (Clubs/networks/platforms) – Almost 50 volunteers from different organization, CBOs, associations, universities, platforms were engaged as RTI defenders, who undertook tasks to mobilize their stakeholders and community members.

3. Building capacities of local communities to mitigate problems created by their discrimination in mainstream societies: ethnic communities, dalits and marginalized women in West-Bangladesh.

Funded By MISEREOR, Germany

In Bangladesh, human rights are tangled with discrimination and unfair treatment. RIB works to shine a light on injustice and help those whose voices are ignored due to societal biases, focuses on helping local communities in Rajshahi and Jashore deal with discrimination, especially ethnic groups, Dalits, and marginalized women.

i. Project Rationale:

Bangladesh, despite its immense potential and economic success, grapples with precarious human rights situations, characterized by societal division, political polarization, dysfunctional governance, and pervasive discrimination against marginalized groups, particularly women, indigenous communities, and religious minorities. Discrimination manifests in various forms, including limited access to land, education, and public services. Women, in particular, face systemic marginalization, evident in discriminatory laws, early marriages, dowry practices, and limited political representation. Indigenous communities and religious minorities also suffer from land evictions, exploitation, and extra-legal violence, perpetuating their marginalization.

ii. Human Rights Situation of Target Groups:

- **Women:** Women in Bangladesh face systemic discrimination perpetuated by legal frameworks, societal norms, and patriarchal structures. Discriminatory marriage laws, limited inheritance rights, and the

prevalence of domestic violence undermine their social and economic status. Additionally, rural women are often married off early and subjected to dowry practices, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

- **Indigenous Communities and Religious Minorities:** Indigenous communities and religious minorities are vulnerable to land dispossession, exploitation, and violence. Protected by influential elites, perpetrators often evade accountability, perpetuating injustice against these marginalized groups.
- **Dalits:** Dalits, considered among the most marginalized groups, face discrimination based on caste and occupation. Traditionally engaged in stigmatized professions, they encounter social stigma and economic marginalization, hindering their access to opportunities and resources.

iii. Project Scope and Target Groups:

The project aims to empower ethnic communities (Santals, Oraons, Bagdis, and Mahatos) and Dalit communities (Kawras and Rabidas/Rishis), alongside marginalized women from mainstream communities, in Rajshahi and Jashore. These communities face systemic discrimination, hindering their access to rights, services, and opportunities. The project seeks to address their unique challenges through targeted interventions and capacity-building initiatives.

iv. RIB's Methodological Approach:

RIB has prior experience working with marginalized communities in similar contexts. RIB's methodological approach emphasizes Participatory Action Research (PAR), empowering communities to identify, prioritize, and address their own issues through collaborative research and advocacy. Additionally, leveraging the Right to Information (RTI) Act and capacity-building initiatives, RIB aims to enhance community resilience and promote social change.

v. Theory of Change and Project Indicators:

The project's theory of change revolves around PAR, RTI, capacity building, and dialogues as catalysts for positive social transformation. By engaging communities in research, advocacy, and dialogue with local authorities, the project aims to mitigate multi-layered problems faced by marginalized groups and facilitate access to justice and essential services. Key indicators include the active engagement of PAR groups in local action, capacity enhancement of both communities and authorities and the alleviation of tensions through informed dialogue and inter-group collaboration.

Through these concerted efforts, the project endeavors to foster inclusive development, empower marginalized groups, and advance human rights in Rajshahi and Jashore, contributing to a more equitable and just society.

Working Areas and Targeted Groups

This project covered the districts of Rajshahi and Jashore, focusing on specific areas within these regions. In Rajshahi, the study concentrated on Godagari Upazila, encompassing four Unions. Similarly, the consultants focused on Sadar Upazila in Jashore, covering four Unions. Within these working areas, the study primarily targeted ethnic communities, Dalits, and marginalized women, seeking to understand their socio-economic status, experiences of discrimination, and access to justice. This baseline survey involved ethnic groups in both Godagari Upazila of Rajshahi District and Sadar Upazila of Jashore District. In

Godagari Upazila, the ethnic groups involved in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) included Mahato, Oraon, Santal, and the mainstream population. In Sadar Upazila, the ethnic groups included Bagdi, Rishi, Kayaputra, and the mainstream population. These ethnic groups were distributed across various villages within the respective Upazilas and were involved as part of the baseline survey to understand their perspectives, experiences, and challenges related to discrimination and social inclusion.

The study targets several distinct groups within Bangladesh, each facing unique socio-economic challenges and discrimination.

1. **Santals:** As one of the largest ethnic communities in Bangladesh, primarily residing in Rajshahi and Rangpur Divisions, Santals comprise nearly 20% of the total ethnic population. They are divided into 12 clans based on traditional livelihood patterns. Despite their significant presence, Santals grapple with extreme poverty, landlessness, illiteracy, and limited access to public services, further exacerbating their marginalization.

2. **Oraons:** Predominantly inhabited in the Barind tract of Rajshahi Division, with scattered populations in northern districts, Oraons are divided into different clans. Despite their sizable population, estimated at 2,45,000 as per the 1991 census, Oraons face socio-economic challenges and limited educational opportunities, with their language, Kuruk, lacking a written script.

3. **Bagdi:** Indigenous to the South-Western districts of Bangladesh, the Bagdi community traces its origins to ancestors who migrated to the region to ensure safety from predators. Their main occupations, including fishing, rickshaw and van pulling, and agriculture, are threatened by diminishing fishing lands and lack of access to resources, perpetuating discrimination and socio-economic hardships.

4. **Kawras or Kayputras:** Settled in Jashore since the 1850s, the Kawras primarily rely on pig rearing for their livelihoods. However, due to societal perceptions associating pigs with religious taboos, they face social stigma and are marginalized within the community, despite their significant contributions to agriculture.

5. **Robidas or Rishi communities:** Traditionally engaged in leatherwork, such as cobbling, the Robidas community originates from regions spanning Bhojpur in Bihar to Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. Despite their craftsmanship, most Robidas live in poverty, resorting to day labor or rickshaw pulling due to a lack of capital and minimal literacy rates.

6. **Mahato:** Mainly residing in northern districts, the Mahato community, also known as Kurmi, primarily relies on agriculture for sustenance. However, landlessness and limited access to resources hinder their economic progress, exacerbating their socio-economic challenges.

7. **Marginalized Women:** Women, particularly from marginalized communities, face systemic discrimination entrenched in patriarchal structures, affecting their inheritance and property rights. Marginalized women are often deprived of educational and economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion.

4. Project title: Strengthening the human rights and social participation of marginalised groups in Bangladesh with specific focus on women and girls (short: HOPE)

Funded by NETZ Partnership for Development and Justice

Summary of the project

Through the programme, 10,090 strengthened human rights defenders (HRDs) and 1,490 representatives of public authorities work effectively together to strengthen the rights, resources and representation of women, girls and minority groups in the programme districts and at the national level. Comprehensive capacity building of HRDs from local to national level and partner NGOs, their networking and advocacy work as well as the creation of sustainable, institutionalised cooperation mechanisms between civil society and state agencies contribute to strengthening the human rights and social participation of marginalised groups. The HRDs from the programme districts systematically share their experiences with state and civil society representatives at national and international level via a national HRD platform. Strengthening HRDs' capacity in methods of conflict sensitive democratic dialogue with public authorities and their context-specific use contributes directly to strengthening civil society's scope for action.

Direct/ indirect target group

Direct target group – their competencies are directly strengthened, and they use the capacities built up:

- 4,680 young volunteer HRDs in 72 high schools (one per union) in the 6 programme districts.
- 5,370 adult volunteer HRDs from village to district level in the programme districts, including socially en-gaged citizens from the programme regions as well as teachers, school management committee mem-bers and parents of students in the supported high schools.
- 40 full-time civil society actors (programme staff).

Institutional direct target group – their capacity building is an integral part of the project:

- 216 human rights groups in the 72 high schools (72 student forums, 72 self-defence groups and 72 thea-tre groups) in which young volunteer HRDs are organised.
- 234 human rights groups in which adult volunteer HRDs are organised:
 - 144 village level civil society organisations (CSOs)
 - 72 CSOs at union level
 - 12 sub-district level CSOs
 - 6 district level CSOs
- 72 elected union councils, 12 elected sub-district councils and 18 sub-district and district authorities.

-----X-----

B. Activity of the Projects :

RLS : Transformation towards ecological and gender justice and sustainability (2023-2024)

Activity 1: Facilitating participatory action research (PAR) activities and community engagement through at least 60 meetings regularly with at least 6 PAR groups (10 meetings per group) to develop the capacity for environmental literacy, ecological ethics, civic democracy and gender justice.

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) group farmers have been actively expanding their involvement in agroecology, particularly in the production and marketing sectors. Women members have played a crucial role by addressing gender-related issues during both informal and formal gatherings. Additionally, youth groups from three villages in Bogura and Satkhira have been organizing events to highlight actions on ecological and social justice. These youth groups have taken the initiative to conduct surveys to identify ecological components, which will help them prepare for future community-based activities under Activity 2. In Satkhira, PAR farmers have started working on their agroecology plots and are processing crops this season. They have also begun training other village farmers on the use of BARI IMO and BAOFAR fertilizers. For broader community development, the youth organized an event at the local Bongshipur Bazar. This gathering focused on educating villagers about the importance of ecology and included discussions on climate and gender justice. These activities continue to foster community awareness and encourage collective action towards ecological and social well-being.

Activity 2: Engaging with youths and students and other farm and non-farm communities on the issues of agroecology, climate change and gender justice:

a. Conducting or facilitating at least 6 community-based public activities to sensitize the community on ecological and social justice issues.

Public Activity 1: Green Initiative: Tree Plantation and Bird Habitat Preservation in Noyapara village to promote ecological agriculture

The Noyapara Youth Group has initiated a transformative project called "Green Initiative: Tree Plantation and Bird Habitat Preservation" in Noyapara village, focusing on promoting ecological agriculture and enhancing biodiversity. This effort involves planting a wide variety of trees, including medicinal plants, fruit trees, and flowering shrubs, to support local ecosystems and provide habitats for birds and other wildlife. Trees have been strategically planted around key community spaces, such as mosques, schools, and homes, to increase greenery and bolster ecological resilience across the village. Recently, the youth group added a banner at the village entrance to raise awareness about the importance of trees, emphasizing their crucial role in maintaining environmental balance. Additionally, they have taken innovative steps by using some trees as natural birdhouses and attaching small pots to provide safe nesting areas for birds.

Public Activity 2 : Harvesting and processing of pesticide-free crops for market distribution to promote ecological agriculture.

In Baluartair village youth groups taken a significant effort that has been made to promote agroecological farming practices by identifying and supporting individual farmers who produce crops without using chemical pesticides. A comprehensive list of these farmers has been created to facilitate the collection of

their crops and supply them to the local market, ensuring that consumers have access to healthy, poison-free vegetables. This initiative not only supports sustainable agricultural practices but also empowers local farmers by providing them with a platform to market their produce more effectively. To further enhance consumer awareness and demand for these eco-friendly products, various promotional activities have been undertaken. To further enhance consumer awareness and demand for these eco-friendly products, various promotional activities have been undertaken. These include creating engaging social media reels, designing informative posters, and displaying banners at strategic locations.

Public Activity 3 : Engaging with students and teachers on environment protection and hygiene’ to promote ecological agriculture.

Majhbari Youth groups engaging in a discussion that has been held with students and teachers about cleanliness and hygiene practices. These discussions emphasize the significance of maintaining a clean school environment for the health and well-being of all. They have demonstrated a practical approach to cleanliness, activities such as placing bins strategically around the school and organizing clean-up drives with student participation are conducted. These activities help instill a sense of responsibility and collective effort among students.

Public Activity 4 : Usage of Chemical Fertilizer and pesticides by the farmers in Dhumghat, Satkhira: A preliminary study’ to promote ecological agriculture

In the Dhumghat area, a comprehensive preliminary research study was conducted by the youth groups to understand the procurement, sale, and usage of chemical fertilizers among local farmers. A detailed questionnaire was prepared and used to gather insights into the practices and challenges faced by the farming community regarding chemical fertilizer usage. The findings from this research were compiled into a visually engaging poster, which was shared with the community to raise awareness about the impact of chemical fertilizers. Additionally, the research documented and disseminated 3 case studies of farmers using chemical fertilizers, highlighting the consequences they are facing, such as soil degradation, reduced crop yields, and health issues. These case studies provide real-life examples of the adverse effects of chemical fertilizers and serve as educational tools for other farmers.

Public Activity 5 : Art for Change: Wall Art and social media for Awareness’ to promote ecological agriculture

The wall art is an initiative by Bongshipur in the village that has created a vibrant tapestry of visuals highlighting critical issues such as climate justice, ecological justice, and gender justice. These artworks serve as both educational tools and sources of inspiration, designed to engage and inform villagers of all ages. Youths from Bongshipur village collaborated with local community members, especially youth groups, to ensure that the messages were relevant and resonated deeply with the local context. Each wall art was meticulously planned, reflecting themes such as the impacts of climate change on agriculture, the importance of preserving biodiversity, and the roles of women in fostering sustainable practices. By integrating traditional art forms with contemporary messages, the initiative successfully bridged generational gaps, fostering a sense of ownership and pride among villagers

Public Activity 6 : Promoting gender justice through community engagement and cultural activities to promote ecological agriculture

A lyrical drama titled "Kobul Bolar Age"(Before giving the bride's consent to a Muslim marriage) was performed, focusing on gender awareness. This performance creatively conveyed the importance of gender equality and the societal challenges related to it, engaging audiences through storytelling and music. The preparation of a wall magazine focusing on gender awareness and climate change is an innovative initiative aimed at highlighting the unique challenges faced by the youths at their community. This project seeks to create a platform for young people to express their experiences, thoughts, and solutions regarding these pressing issues. By showcasing wall magazine, it aims to educate and engage the community, fostering a deeper understanding of how gender dynamics and climate change intersect to impact the lives of young individuals.

b. Conducting action research with students on farming in 2 project areas to spread awareness on sustainable agriculture and environmental issues.

Action Research 1 : In continuation of previous years' efforts, the agricultural plot at the school compound is being cultivated by the designated farmers following the principles of agroecology. The students are regularly updated about the season-wise tasks and a group will be formed in the next quarter to increase their involvement. "The Research Assistant, with the help of the students, conducted a session where experienced students participated and shared their knowledge with the new students.

Action Research 2 : In continuation of previous years' efforts, the agricultural plot at the school compound is being cultivated by selected students with the help of the designated farmers following the principles of agroecology. The students are regularly updated about the season-wise tasks and a group will be formed in the next quarter to increase their involvement. The agroecology plot has become a resource hub for the students. Each week, the agriculture teacher of the school guides the students in their work on the land. Students receive regular updates on seasonal tasks, fostering their understanding of the agricultural cycle and promoting hands-on experience. To further enhance their involvement, a dedicated group will be formed in the next quarter, encouraging students to take an active role in the cultivation process. Each week, the agriculture teacher collaborates with the farmers to guide the students in their work on the land. This partnership enriches the educational experience, allowing students to gain valuable insights into agroecology while contributing to the sustainable management of the school's agricultural resources. Through this initiative, students are not only learning about ecological practices but are also empowered to become stewards of the environment, cultivating a sense of responsibility and connection to their local food systems.

Activity 3: Producing educational materials to generate and spread knowledge on sustainable agriculture, climate politics, gender and systemic alternatives in the Bangla language:

a. Publishing and dissemination of at least one booklet on present situation, challenges, and pathways in agroecology in Bangladesh

3.a - A Policy Paper on Present Situation, Challenges and Pathways in Agroecology in Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Agroecology is a modern and environmentally conscious agricultural approach that emphasizes sustainability, biodiversity, and resilience. It integrates agricultural production systems with the natural environment to minimize the sector's ecological footprint and achieve long-term food security.

Agroecological practices can enhance efficiency, long-term productivity, and aid in conserving natural resources. In Bangladesh, agroecology offers opportunities to bolster food security, protect the environment, and improve farmers' livelihoods. However, widespread adoption faces challenges, including climate change, policy gaps, resource limitations, and a lack of relevant knowledge, hindering the implementation and expansion of agroecological practices.

Bangladesh's agricultural sector predominantly relies on traditional methods, characterized by extensive use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation. While some efforts have been made to introduce agroecological perspectives and practices, they remain largely underutilized. Climate change-induced events such as floods, droughts, and excessive rainfall are reducing agricultural productivity, making it increasingly difficult for farmers to maintain high-yield systems.

This policy paper reviews the tradition and current status of agroecology in Bangladesh, identifies key challenges, and discusses strategic directions for potential development.

1.1. Importance of Agroecology

Agroecology establishes a harmonious relationship between agriculture and the environment. It reduces environmental pressure and supports increased agricultural production while conserving biodiversity. The primary components of agroecology include:

- **Sustainability:** Conducting agricultural activities in a manner that ensures long-term productivity and environmental protection.
- **Biodiversity Conservation:** Maintaining the balance of agricultural elements such as soil, water, air, and natural landscapes.
- **Resilience:** Enhancing the capacity to withstand adverse effects of climate change and other natural disasters.

In agriculture-dependent countries like Bangladesh, adopting agroecology can establish a balanced relationship between long-term food security and the environment.

1.2. Current Status of Agroecology in Bangladesh

The state of agroecology in Bangladesh remains confined to traditional practices. Farmers predominantly use chemical fertilizers and pesticides, adversely affecting the environment and gradually diminishing soil fertility. The current agricultural framework in Bangladesh is unsustainable, necessitating the adoption of advanced technology, new methods, market expansion, prioritization in national policies, societal and NGO participation, reduction of gender disparities, and support from universities and research institutions. However, some effective agroecological practices are gradually being incorporated, such as:

- **Organic Farming:** Utilizing natural inputs instead of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.
- **Rainwater Harvesting:** Implementing new technologies to construct small reservoirs and retain rainwater.
- **Crop Diversification:** Transitioning from monoculture to cultivating various crops, preserving soil fertility, and enhancing climate resilience.

1.3. Major Challenges in Agroecology

The implementation of agroecology in Bangladesh faces several significant challenges:

1. **Climate Change:** Agriculture in Bangladesh is severely impacted by climate change. Floods, droughts, and excessive rainfall disrupt farming activities, leading to reduced productivity. (IPCC, 2021)
2. **Policy Weaknesses:** Existing policies generally promote input-dependent agriculture, with insufficient focus on environmental protection and sustainability. Robust governmental policy implementation is required. (FAO, 2020)
3. **Resource Limitations:** Farmers lack access to necessary technology, financial support, and training, hindering the adoption of agroecological methods. (World Bank, 2020)
4. **Lack of Farmer Awareness:** Farmers are not adequately informed about new agricultural technologies and environmentally friendly practices, resulting in adherence to traditional methods.

1.4. Strategic Development Pathways

To enhance the acceptance of agroecology in Bangladesh, policy reforms, farmer training, and increased governmental support are essential. Strategic measures include:

1. **Policy Reform:** Developing agroecology-friendly national policies to integrate agroecological principles into mainstream agricultural strategies and provide incentives for farmers adopting sustainable practices. (World Bank, 2020)
2. **Farmer Training and Education:** Organizing training programs and seminars to educate farmers about environmentally friendly agricultural methods. (FAO, 2020)
3. **Financial Support:** Offering low-interest loans and subsidies to encourage farmers to adopt new technologies.
4. **Market Development:** Establishing robust market systems for organic produce and facilitating direct market access for farmers.
5. **Research and Innovation:** Investing in research institutions to develop climate-resilient and locally adapted agroecological solutions.
6. **Community Engagement:** Promoting farmer-led initiatives and cooperative efforts to strengthen knowledge exchange and collective action.

Conclusion

Agroecology can pave the way for a sustainable future in Bangladesh's agriculture. By ensuring stability, reducing environmental degradation, and securing food safety, agroecology offers a viable path forward. Through policy reforms, raising awareness, providing technological and financial incentives, and fostering research and community involvement, the acceptance of agroecology can be enhanced, contributing to national food security and environmental conservation. Collaborative efforts among

government agencies, farmers, research institutions, and the private sector are essential to achieve a sustainable agricultural future.

3.b Nature of Activity: Cultural Performance

Title: The Battle of Kobi Gaan on the Topic of Environment and Gender Justice.

Brief description of the content: The "Battle of Kobi Gaan" is an engaging and vibrant presentation designed to address critical issues related to the environment and gender justice. This event combines performances with discussions to emphasize the significance of environmental sustainability and gender equality. Through artistic expression, the program aims to raise awareness, stimulate dialogue, and inspire action toward building a more equitable and environmentally conscious society.



B.1 Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB's) activities on RTI law for the year 2024:

1. In the year 2024, RIB has not received any RTI requests, however stakeholders who are promoting RTI law with whom RIB closely works have submitted several RTI requests to various authorities. The details of those are as follows:

RTI Application data breakdown

Area	General application	Total Appeal	Total complaint
Dinajpur	309	99	16
Nilphamari	644	56	01
Moulvibazar	638	90	
Rajshahi	150		
Jessore	201		
Satkhira	177		
Total RTI	2119	245	17

General applications breakdown at different levels

RTI requests at Unions/Pourashava	509 (24%)	Seeking primary information like services/benefits
RTI requests at Upazila level	879 (41.5%)	Seeking primary information like services/benefits. Institutional accountability
RTI requests at District level	394 (18.6%)	Institutional accountability
RTI request at Divisional level	83 (4%)	Institutional accountability/Transparency
RTI requests at National Level (Ministry, Directorate and other)	254 (12%)	Transparency
Total	2119	

2. RIB adopts following process to promote RTI law in Bangladesh

- (1) Build the capacity of prospective RTI users to use RTI i.e. Right to Information Act on service delivery, accountability and transparency issues;
- (2) Support and facilitate the filing of applications;
- (3) Help deepen the process of RTI by addressing core issues of accountability and transparency;
- (4) Continuous interaction between government and citizen through participation at various events which helps in reducing the gap and improve relationship between the two sides.
- (5) Documentation and dissemination of the results derived through RTI requests fillings.

The core of RIB's RTI-related capacity-building activities has been to organize socially aware citizens/activists/ communities around principles of self-management through the process of Participatory Action Research. The groups are trained in the understanding and application of the Right to Information Act through an interactive process of internalizing the different clauses of the law with their own lived experiences. Through this hands-on training, they learn how to best frame their questions, how to address the appropriate authority and taught how to file applications in the correct way.

3. Activities performed in 2024

A. Day observations



Rally and discussion meetings were organized in 3 working districts to mark observations of International Human Rights Day on 10th December, Women's Day on 8th March, Labour Day on 01st May, and International Right to Information Day on 28th September. There were mass gatherings during rallies. In these events, discussions were made on the importance of RTI to the governance system which ultimately leads to the protection and promotion of rights of women, and workers. Additionally, participants in these events discussed about the importance of preserving the environment and dealing with

issues of climate change and how RTI can be used to tackle problems that emanate from environment and climate change issues. During activities to observe World Environment Day, many school students in working districts planted a large number of saplings and initiated meaningful discussions. These events saw the presence of representatives from government authorities too, which provided an opportunity for government representatives and citizens to come together and interact on issues which affect everyone on a large scale. These events provided a good opportunity to create mass awareness on themes like the promotion of workers' rights, RTI and climate-induced disasters and state responsibility to ensure the protection of its people.

B. Exchange learning visits

There were exchange visits that took place in Sylhet to oversee the work of another organization with several RTI enthusiasts that took place in the year 2024. During these visits, RTI enthusiasts had the opportunity to exchange views on their works on RTI as well as learn the techniques of making the right kind of RTI requests, and strategies to mitigate challenges, that may come along following submission of RTI requests. Additionally, the visiting RTI enthusiasts had the opportunity to attend meetings and dialogues with government officer's, people's representatives and other RTI users of the visiting area. It was a fruitful event as both sides had the opportunity to share their experiences as well as take away the experiences from the districts they visited.

C. Courtyard meetings in villages



Courtyard meetings were held in Union level (in a village or a marketplace) of working districts to promote RTI at the grassroot level. The meetings were attended by the common people of the villages who mostly consisted of local traders, school and college teachers, journalists, women, farmers, women leaders, CBOs representatives, daily

wage earners, homemakers, local leaders and workers. The purpose of these meetings was to promote RTI and encourage the common people to use the law and after the meetings were held it was observed that people were more aware of the law which created a tendency to use the law among the grassroots people from those areas. These meetings turned out very effective as during meetings discussions were centered around raising knowledge and awareness about RTI law as well as how effective implementation of RTI law can improve the overall governance system and access to information can increase delivery of service in our country.

D. Monthly meetings of group members (RTI activists)

During the year 2024, 36 monthly meetings with RTI group members and enthusiasts were conducted through a participatory process, discussions focusing on issues that were derived through the monthly exercise of newspaper scanning as well as existing local pertinent issues or problems in the relevant working districts are taken into consideration for making requests and RTI has been submitted to resolve such identified issues or problems. In such meetings, discussions are generally made on (a) further deepening of understanding of the Right to Information Act 2009 and how the law is being implemented in the country including the right process to submit RTI (b) what are the pertinent issues in that particular district as well as nationally, against which RTI applications can be submitted to bring systemic change by improving governance and transparency culture (c) what were the outcomes of submitted RTI applications, learning and experiences of RTI activists in submitting these requests and challenges they face while making RTI requests are documented. This monthly exercise has proven to be a very effective and result-driven exercise which motivates RTI activists a great deal.

E. Dialogue between Government authority and RTI Activists, and enthusiasts on the functioning of RTI in working districts



Many Dialogue meetings were organised between government authorities and RTI activities as well as the general public in the year 2024. These meetings were organised in Dinajpur, Nilphamari, and Nilphamari and Moulvibazar districts, in these dialogue meetings government officers, and civil society members, journalists and RTI activists

from the above-mentioned districts participated. The objective of the dialogue meetings were to create a space for the demand and supply sides to interact freely and, at the same time to inform government officers about the challenges RTI activists are facing while submitting RTI requests in their offices, these meetings also served as a good mechanism to remove fear from citizens mind; exchange of experiences between demand and supply side also opened the windows of opportunities for existing users to increase use of the law as well as new activists to emerge. We have seen that after an open discussion between the

demand and supply sides during these dialogue meetings, submission of RTI to those government offices later on yielded more responses and an improved relationship emerged between the two sides.

F. Interactive theatre on RTI:

In the year 2024 interactive theatre on RTI were organised in Dinajpur, Nilphamari and Moulvibazar. A drama script on RTI was prepared and it was presented to a large number of audiences by performing actors. These events were quite successful because a large number of people could easily connect to the script (prepared on how they are faring in their daily lives) and at the end of the drama a discussion was initiated as to where we are now in terms of governance system and what needs to be done to bring a systemic change in the country. In each district, the public drama took place in open space and there were gatherings of nearly 300-500 people who received messages on RTI.

G. Public Debate:

Several public debates were organized in Dinajpur and Nilphamari, including one on the campus of Haji Danesh University of Science and Technology. The debate topic focused on the use of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, with two sides formed: one arguing for the law's existence and the other against it. The two parties presented the merits and demerits of the law, discussing its usefulness to the government by involving the public in the governance process.

H. Fellowship Program:

A fellowship was awarded under the project to three university students who had conducted research on three different issues focusing on the project area. The objective of the fellowship was to encourage students to conduct research and share knowledge with the student community on how the Right to Information (RTI) Act could solve issues by encouraging good governance.

I. Advocacy Meeting:

In 2024, numerous advocacy meetings were conducted throughout the project area. The primary goals of these meetings were to promote the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2009 and raise awareness among journalists, civil society members, students, and government employees regarding the proper utilization of the law. RTI activists shared their expertise and experiences with these target groups, explaining the provisions of the Act and demonstrating its potential for positive impact. Discussions also centered on the responsible application of the RTI Act, emphasizing the importance of using it appropriately and ethically, and avoiding its misuse against individuals or the government. Participants explored various scenarios and case studies to illustrate both the benefits of utilizing RTI and the potential pitfalls of its misapplication. The meetings aimed to empower these key stakeholders with the knowledge and understanding necessary to effectively exercise their right to information and contribute to greater transparency and accountability.

J. National Seminar

A national seminar was held in Dhaka on September 11, 2024. Nearly 75 participants attended, including representatives from the anti-discriminatory student movement, civil society organizations, journalists, RTI activists from three districts, human rights defenders, representatives from INGOs, and the Convener

of the RTI Forum. The Chief Guest at the event was the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression. The seminar was organized to disseminate the findings of a recently concluded project. A meaningful discussion ensued, during which participants shared their experiences of using RTI in their daily work and discussed how it had evolved into a necessary tool for establishing transparency and accountability. Participants also addressed the challenges that hindered the effective use of the RTI regime in Bangladesh.

K. Book and leaflet publication on RTI

RIB published a total of 500 books on Use of RTI and 1000 leaflet on RTI and its related theme was printed in the year 2024 and disseminated to the large number of publics. We are confident that the published book is going to be very useful to the readers because it covers all possible issues and matters under the RTI law relating to demand side (general people), supply side (designated officers) and adjudicatory body (information commission). This book gives comprehensive idea on RTI along with a global picture of RTI and a kind of hands-on resource material to self-educate on concept of RTI.

L. Road Show and Information Fair on RTI to Celebrate Right to Know Day

A road show and information fair on RTI was organized by RIB in Dinajpur, Nilphamari and Moulvibazar Districts. While covering various Upazilas in these districts' participants were able to spread messages and awareness on RTI as well as discuss the process of filing RTI with the concerned authority. Through this attempt, approximately thousands of people were able to receive messages and learn about RTI. This was regarded by most people as one of the effective mechanisms for spreading awareness on RTI law. The roadshow was comprised of local folk songs on RTI and a discussion program. There was participation by the government offices in these programs. Through these events, it was possible to disseminate knowledge on RTI law and motivate people for greater use of the law to increase demand.

M. Training on RTI and follow up

In the year 2024, RIB provided trainings and follow up trainings to local people including teachers, journalists, local and community leaders, students, representatives of CBOs, women leaders, homemakers, tea workers, different labors and few organizations working on various themes also received RTI trainings during the above-mentioned period. These trainings were provided in persons in the local area of working districts.

N. RTI Workshops:



During the year 2024 RIB organized numerous RTI Workshops in 3 districts namely Moulvibazar, Nilphamari, Dinajpur. These events were organized to create awareness among general public and to provide hands-on experience on correct process to write RTI applications. These events helped in developing skills of people in understanding the objectives of RTI and process to correctly use it.

O. Monthly publication on use and status of RTI in the Daily Star newspaper.

RTI team at RIB regularly writes a column on RTI which is published in The Daily Star newspaper on 15th of every month. In the year 2024, twelve monthly articles on various important issues encompassing RTI were published. Copies of above articles published in 2024 are available at RIB's website: www.rib-rtibangladesh.org.

B.2 Project Activities of HOPE Project

A. Narrative Report (October 2024)

• Strategic reflection and steering Meeting:

The Steering Committee Meeting of 'Strengthening the human rights and social participation of marginalised groups in Bangladesh with specific focus on women and girls (HOPE)' was held on 16 October, at 9.30 am at NGO Forum, Lalmatia, Dhaka. The main purpose of the steering committee meeting was to review the status and identify strategies for quality implementation. At the beginning of the meeting, condolence was expressed over the death of Rabiul Azam, director of Manab Kallyan Parishad-MKP, and a minute's silence was observed as a tribute to him. RIB, Pollisree and MKP have presented the update of project activities. The presentations focused on the progress of the project activity, major impact and challenges. They also shared the best practices of community level. From RIB there were 5 number of Project personals participated.

• Upazila & District CSO Formation Meeting :

In Tala: The convening committee of Civil Society Organization (CSO) has been formed in Tala with the aim of protecting the human rights of marginalized groups especially women and girls and increasing social participation. A discussion meeting on the occasion of the formation of CSO at the upazila level with the support of the Hope project of Recharge Initiative Bangladesh (RIB) was held on Thursday (October 10) afternoon at Tala Bir Muktiyodha Moral Abdus Salam public library room. The meeting was chaired by Zulfikar Raihan, RIB Hope Project Coordinator Bikash Dash was moderated the formation meeting.

Head Teacher of Tala Shaheed Kamel Model High School Gazi Zahidur Rahman, Artist Chandra Shekhar Das, Rights activist Dilip Das, NGO workers China Das, Asit Kumar, Sapna Biswas, Jewel Sarkar, Shankar Kumar Das, Tarek Sarkar, librarian Afzal Hossain were present along with people from different sectors in society. The participants expressed their views on equal status and human rights for all and assured that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) will work to protect the rights of marginalized people. At the end of the meeting, journalist BM Zulfikar Raihan selected as convener and artist Chandra Shekhar Dash as Co-convener of Tala Upazila CSO with 11 members convening committee. In satkhira sadar upazila a CSO was formed by discussion meeting on 10/10/2024. At the Monirampur Upazila CSO formation meeting was held at public library, Monirampur. The meeting presided over Mr. Babul Akter and convening committee was formed.

District CSO Formation Meeting held at 29 and 30 October 2024 at Satkhira and Jashore. The event was Organized by Research Initiative Bangladesh (RIB) on Tuesday afternoon and the event presided over the Advocate and HRD Ad. Al Mahmud Palash. The former General Secretary of the District Lawyers Association Ed. Osman Gani, Ed. Rafiqul Islam, Ed. Sirajul Islam, Ed. AKM Samsuddoha Khokon, Project Coordinator of Research Initiative Bangladesh (RIB) Bikash Das, Area Coordinator Rehena Parveen, Satkhira, correspondent of DBC News M. Belal Hossain, Dalit Parishad President Gaur Pad Das and others. Speakers said, we will work where rights are denied. We will stand by people's rights.

In jashore, the meeting was presided over the social activist Shahjahan Nannu and facilitated by Khalid Hasan, Area Coordinator, RIB, Jashore.

- **Village CSO Meeting:** Under the HOPE project provision there are 48 number of village CSO meeting completed by the reporting period. In the meeting, reformation of village CSOs, RTI application process, PAR, problem identifications and planning as well as violence against women issues were discussed. Participants also shared that there are remains domestic violence and often their male counterpart doesn't recognized women contribution in family. Child marriage, dowry and its root caused were discussed also. Extreme poverty, lack of access to services, social exclusion, limited economic opportunities for women as it is also the reasons of barriers to women and girls development. Field Facilitators were facilitated the meeting.

- **Union CSO Formation:** In order to institutionalize the adult HRDs there has total 2 Nos Union level CSO formation meeting has been completed by reporting period. The meeting were gathered the youth, minority, women, activists to formation. Union CSO convener committee were formed as initial stage and decided to reform it during first CSO union meeting. During the meeting, the gender ratio, criteria to get membership of CSO also discussed and highlights the human rights, gender based violence issues. Participants from different ward of the Unions also eager to be members of CSOs. In most meetings, participation of UPs body of the respective union was adding vitality to the discussions. This month, 2 union CSOs were formed, The committees formed at the union level will remain vigilant to achieve the project's objectives.

- **Student Forum Formation Meeting :** To enhance students capacity in regard to make them human rights defenders at the school level, forum formation meeting has been completed in 14 schools at Satkhira Sadar, Keshabpur and Monirampur upazilas. The head teachers have cooperated in forming the forums at each school. Meeting covers participatory discussions with the introduction through game. Objectives of the event, Roles and Responsibilities of the Students Forum were presented by poster papers and elaborated. At the end of the discussions students forum were formed with presence of member of SMC, teachers.

- **Theater Forum formation:** Under the project Provision RIB implemented 24 nos. theater formation meeting at selected schools of Jashore and Satkhira District. With the assistance of mentor and head teachers of respective schools theater team were formed with members 20 includes 10 boys and 10 girls at each school. During the meeting the facilitators presented their roles and responsibility of theater team under the HOPE project. Mentor teacher and facilitators also facilitated practical session to understand the level of skills to be active member of theater forum.

• **Upazila CSO Meeting** : There were 4 nos. upazila CSO meeting has been done at Jashore and Satkhira. The Meeting was presided by the convener of CSO at each upazila. The meeting agenda was finalization of upazila CSO committee formation, discussion on the local perspective of human rights abuse, gender inequality, problem identification process also discussed in the meeting. Participants also decided to execute democratic dialogue meeting at sub-district level on first week of December and further a CSO meeting has been demanded for problem identifications. Participants discussion on rights of Dalits ethnic minority, women and girls also discussed. The meeting was facilitated by Mr. Bikash Das, Project Coordinator, Area Coordinator Khalid Hasan, Rehana Perven of the HOPE project. Other's representatives of the marginalized communities were present & delivered their speech, and committed to working towards to implementation of the project's vision and mission. They also provided various suggestions for community development.

Union CSO Meeting: The meeting was held at Union level to coordinate and well organize the union level CSO. In the meeting, CSO committee finalization, Human Rights, Gender equality aspects, techniques of problem identification and participatory planning, CSO roles and responsibilities, Nomination of two representatives for Upazila CSO, About democratic dialogue meeting as it was discussed.

• **Project Inception Meeting:**

At Keshabpur:

In Keshabpur, an upazila project inception meeting for the development of human rights of marginalized people, especially women and girls, was held on Monday, October 21 at 10 am in the hall room of the upazila executive officer. The meeting was moderated by RIB HOPE project Area Coordinator Khalid Hasan. Journalist Md. Harunar Rashid Bulbul, Co-convener of Keshabpur CSO Committee and general secretary of Keshabpur News Club, presided over the event. Md. Zakir Hossain, Keshabpur Upazila Executive Officer, was present as the chief guest in the event. As a special guest, Bikash Kumar Das, coordinator of HOPE project, informed about the project in the seminar. Since 2002, the organization has been implementing various programs aimed at creating awareness about socio-economic development, research and rights of poor people, especially backward people, adolescents, women and men and children in different parts of the country. In continuation of this, the project entitled "Strengthening the human rights and social participation of marginalized peoples, especially women and adolescents - "HOPE" with the help of the development partner organization Netz Partnership for Development and Justice as well as BMZ is being implemented in Jessore district - Keshabpur, Manirampur and Satkhira district - Satkhira Sadar and Tala district. The main objective of the HOPE project is to build the capacity of human rights activists and authorities to ensure the rights, resources and representation of women, girls and marginalized groups.

Chairman Md. Alauddin Ala, 6 no. Sadar Union, Chairman Md. Palash, 3 no union, Chairman Md. Amjad Hossain of Vidyanandakati Union, Upazila Secondary Education Officer Md. ASM Zillur Rashid, Upazila Child Affairs Officer Bimal Kundu, Social Services Officer Md. Alamgir Hossain, Women Affairs Officer Rupali Rani Roy, Cooperative Officer Nasima Akhter, Teacher Rezual Hossain along with the leaders coming from various unions of RIB Keshabpur CSO Committee were spoke in the meeting.



• **At Satkhira:** Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) is going to launch HOPE project at Jashore and Satkhira. As a part of its inauguration ceremony RIB organised Project Inception Meeting at Satkhira Public Library Hall room on 10.00 am 22.10.2024. Honorable UNO of Satkhira Sadar Upazilla Md. Soheb Ahmed was chief guest of the meeting. Inspector of BADC, Agriculture, information, ICT Officers, Principals and Teachers, HRDs, CSO members, Media personals, Cultural activists, religious leaders were participated in the meeting. Kamrujjaman Rasel, Aminul Islam, Principle Varoteswori Biswas, Altaf Hossain, Hafizul Islam, Professor Mahfuza Parven, Cultural activist Shamima Ratna, Advocate Al mahmud Palash, CSO Gour Das were delivered their speech as special guests and highlighted to organize peoples against all sorts of violence, discrimination based on race, gender, caste identity. UNO Soheb Ahmed also highlighted that we have to work together to reduce gender inequality with specific focus on marginalized women and girls. He said, due to climate change effect peoples also suffers worst at Satkhira. Gour Das as dalit leaders also demanded to sensitize the society towards dalits and ethnic peoples as they feels insecurity at this area. Kamrujjaman Rasel also emphasized to create economic opportunities for rural and municipalities women particularly who's at risk so that they can be self-sufficient. Advocate Palash as defender he highlighted through his speech that all human being is equal. In order to establish human rights and good governance we need to strength our collective voice. HOPE project will give us that space for make inclusive society and governance. Rehana Parven, Area coordinator of HOPE project presented about HOPE project goal, objectives, outcomes, budget as it is. Bikash Kumar Das, Project Coordinator of RIB HOPE project moderated the inception meeting and he presented about the RIB, Netz as well as HOPE project activities in the meeting.

At Tala: Research Initiative Bangladesh (RIB) has been implemented Project Inception Meeting at Tala on 24.10.2024. The meeting was placed at Meeting venue of Upazila Livestock office, Tala. Honorable UNO Sheikh Muhammad Rasel as chief guest he delivered his speech in the meeting. He said, the HOPE project is the unique opportunities of excluded minorities to be raise their voice and collective initiatives to protect the human rights and gender equality. He is highly gladdened to know such right based project is going to work by RIB. Even He briefed about project implementation strategy and expressed that without people's participation human rights and development plan can't sustain. He committed to make a bridge between CSOs, RIB and local authority. He also vote of thanks to Executive Director and team of RIB, Netz, BMZ for taken HOPE project at this so called excluded Upazila particularly for promoting rights

and social participation of dalits, ethnic Women and girls. Participants from different union of Tala also expressed their commitment to achieve the project objectives. Individuals' participant also puts their commitment to do good work in respect for protecting human rights and avoid bad practice within their family, society so that conflict can be reduced.

At Monirampur: Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) executed Project inception Meeting at Monirampur upazila livestock office hall room on 23.10.2024, Wednesday. ABM Mehdi Masud, Officer In-Charge of Manirampur police station was the chief guest at the meeting. The also presided over the human rights activist journalist Babul Akhtar and moderated by project officer Khalid Hasan. Animal Resources Officer Dr Md Tauhidul Islam, Upazila Youth Development Officer Rezaul Haque, Women Affairs Officer Moushumi Akter, NETZ Bangladesh Program Manager Asim Saha, Project Coordinator Bikash Das, Former Councilor Geeta Rani Kundu, Former councilor Parveen Akhtar, Dalit women activist Susam Das, Upazila Village Court Coordinator Anupam Ghosh spoke in the meeting. etc. People from different classes and professions participated in the inception meeting.



B. Narrative Report (Novemebr 2024)

1. Staff Coordination Meeting:

The Staff coordination Meeting of 'Strengthening the human rights and social participation of marginalised groups in Bangladesh with specific focus on women and girls (HOPE)' was held on 1st December, at 9.30 am at Satkhira project office. The main purpose of the meeting was to review the progress, find challenges and strategy to overcome, Planning of program, Identify strategies for quality implementation. At the beginning of the meeting, 1 minute silence was observed tribute to the all martyrs of liberation war. Area Coordinators have presented the update of project activities. The presentations

focused on the progress of the project activity, major impact and challenges. They also shared the best practices of community level. Activities operational guideline also discussed.

2. Trainings for young HRDs at high schools (Human Rights): HOPE project organized the training for young HRDs at high schools on human rights. The training was two days long. Diversity and plurality, Rights and Human rights, Concept of Rights and human rights, UDHR and Bangladesh Constitutions, Minority and rights, Gender, Sex and gender relation, Gender roles, Gender sensitive behaviour, VAW protection Laws were the session of the training. Students forum members were participated in this two days long training. Group discussion, brain storming, choice of colours, ideology game, acting, demo, pair group discussion were the major method of the training. Total 12 batches of training has been executed.

3. Trainings for young HRDs at high schools (RTI & Democratic dialogue): HOPE project organized the training for young HRDs at high schools on RTI and Democratic Dialogue. The training was two days long. Definition of Information, Necessities of Information, RTI act -2009, Use of RTI, RTI Application process, Barriers to RTI and way forward, Identification of Local service providing agency, Democracy, Element of democracy and characteristics, Practice of democracy, Good governance and its pre-eminence, Participation, accountability & transparency, Definition of dialogue, process of democratic dialogue, roles of facilitators, demo of democratic dialogue were the session of the training. Students forum members were participated in this two days long training. Group discussion, brain storming, game, acting, demo, pair group discussion were the major method of the training. Total 12 batches of training have been executed.

4. Trainings for adult HRDs at union level (Human Rights): HOPE project organized the training for young HRDs at union level on human rights. The training was two days long. Diversity and plurality, Rights and Human rights, Concept of Rights and human rights, UDHR and Bangladesh Constitutions, Minority and rights, Gender, Sex and gender relation, Gender roles, Gender sensitive behaviour, VAW protection Laws were the session of the training. CSO members were participated in these two days long training. Group discussion, brain storming, choice of colours, idology game, acting, demo, pair group discussion were the major method of the training. Total 9 batches of training has been executed.

5. Trainings for adult HRDs at Union level (RTI & Democratic dialogue): HOPE project organized the training for adult HRDs at high schools on RTI and Democratic Dialogue. The training was two days long. Definition of Information, Necessities of Information, RTI act -2009, Use of RTI, RTI Application process, Barriers to RTI and way forward, Identification of Local service providing agency, Democracy, Element of democracy and characteristics, Practice of democracy, Good governance and its pre-eminence, Participation, accountability & transparency, Definition of dialogue, process of democratic dialogue, roles of facilitators, demo of democratic dialogue were the session of the training. CSO members were participated in this two days long training. Group discussion, brain storming, game, acting, demo, pair group discussion were the major method of the training. Total 6 batches of training have been executed.

6. Student Forum Meeting: To enhance students' capacity in regard to make them human rights defenders at the school level, students forum meeting has been completed in 24 schools at Satkhira Sadar, Keshabpur and Monirampur upazilas. The mentor teachers have cooperated in facilitation the forum meeting at each school. Meeting covers participatory discussions with the introduction through game.

Objectives of the event, social problem identifications in specific area of gender equality, sexual harassment, human rights, Good work identifications and planning, enlisting the child who at risk of child marriage, wall magazine publications were the discussed in the meeting.



7. **Theater Forum Meeting:** Under the project Provision RIB implemented 24 nos. theater meeting at schools of Jashore and Satkhira District. With the assistance of mentor teachers of respective schools theater team were discussed the gender, rights of excluded peoples in order to planning the theater performance. Participants also preparing to publish the wall magazine on occasion of day observations. During the meeting the facilitators presented their roles and responsibility of theater team under the HOPE project.

8. **Village CSO Meeting:** Under the HOPE project provision there are 48 number of village CSO meeting completed by the reporting period. In the meeting, RTI application process, Social problem identifications and planning, Nomination of union cso member, enlistment of child whose at risk of child marriage, Massage of national hotline, as well as violence against women issues were discussed. Participants also shared that there are remains domestic violence and often their male counterpart doesn't recognize women contribution in family. Child marriage, dowry and its root caused were discussed also. Extreme poverty, lack of access to services, social exclusion, limited economic opportunities for women as it is also the reasons of barriers to women and girls development. Facilitators shown and inform the national hotline number for services. Field Facilitators were facilitated the meeting.

9. Upazila CSO Meeting : There were 2 nos. upazila CSO meeting has been done at Satkhira. The Meeting was presidized the convener of CSO at each upazila. The meeting agenda was finalization of upazila cso committee formation, discussion on the local perspective of human rights abuse, gender inequality, social problem identification, CSO Planning also discussed in the meeting. Participants also decided to execute democratic dialogue meeting at sub-district level on first week of December. Facilitator was presents the Village CSO identified problems and upazila CSO members endorsed those social problems. Participants discussion on rights of Dalits ethnic minority, women and girls also

discussed. The meeting was facilitated by Mr. Bikash Das, Project Coordinator, Area Coordinator Rehana Perven of the HOPE project. Other's representatives of the marginalized communities were present & delivered their speech, and committed to working towards to implementation of the project's vision and mission.

10. Union CSO Meeting: The meeting was held at Union level to coordinate and well organize the union CSOs. In the meeting CSO committee finalization, Social problems identifications, CSO roles and responsibilities, About democratic dialogue meeting as it is was discussed. There were total 18 number of CSO meeting held at the reporting period. Through the meeting participants prioritized the social problems. Child marriage, drug and online gamble, water logging, exclusion from safetyenet benefits, social security, road repairing as it is issues were being prioritized by participants. Participants were decided to present the problems during dialogue. Facilitators also informed to participants regarding the next democratic dialogue, its process and expected outcomes that will take place at union and upazila level.

11. Fact Finding: During the reporting period CSO and RIB jointly follow up the incident related to domestic violence, brutally attacked and sexual violence as well as physical torture. Those case under follow up of HOPE project. A violence against widow women also referred to Police station for proper trial.



C. Narrative Report of Decemebr 2024

1. Staff Coordination Meeting:

The Staff coordination Meeting of 'Strengthening the human rights and social participation of marginalized groups in Bangladesh with specific focus on women and girls (HOPE)' was held on 26th December, at 9.30 am at Satkhira project office. The main purpose of the meeting was to review the progress, find challenges and strategy to overcome the challenges, learning sharing, Planning of program, Identify strategies for quality implementation. At the beginning of the meeting, all staffs were participated in universal prayer which facilitated by support staff Nayon Das. Area Coordinators have presented the update of project activities. The presentations focused on the progress of the project activity, major impact and challenges. They also shared the best practices of community level. Ali Bokhtiar khan, Accountant was shared the major observations of financial operations. Bikash Kumar Das, Project

Coordinators were shared the interim report tool and data collection tools in the meeting. Thereafter, next quarterly and monthly work plan also discussed and prepared action plan.

2. Trainings for adult HRDs at union level (Human Rights): HOPE project organized the training for young HRDs at union level on human rights. The training was two days long. Diversity and plurality, Rights and Human rights, Concept of Rights and human rights, UDHR and Bangladesh Constitutions, Minority and rights, Gender, Sex and gender relation, Gender roles, Gender sensitive behaviour, VAW protection Laws were the session of the training. CSO members were participated in these two days long training. Group discussion, brain storming, choice of colours, ideology game, acting, demo, pair group discussion was the major method of the training. Total 3 batches of training have been executed by the reporting period.

3. Trainings for adult HRDs at Union level (RTI & Democratic Dialogue): HOPE project organized the training for adult HRDs on RTI and Democratic Dialogue. The training was two days long. Definition of Information, Necessities of Information, RTI act -2009, Use of RTI, RTI Application process, Barriers to RTI and way forward, Identification of Local service providing agency, Democracy, Element of democracy and characteristics, Practice of democracy, Good governance and its pre-eminence, Participation, accountability & transparency, Definition of dialogue, process of democratic dialogue, roles of facilitators, demo of democratic dialogue were the session of the training. CSO members were participated in this two days long training. Group discussion, brain storming, game, acting, demo, pair group discussion were the major method of the training. Total 6 batches of training have been executed.

4. Training on human rights and peace pedagogy for guide teachers and SMC members: HOPE project conducted the training for Guide Teachers and SMC members on human rights and peace pedagogy at Upazila level. The training was two days long. Session on Diversity and plurality, Rights and Human rights, Concept of Rights and human rights, UDHR and Bangladesh Constitutions, Rights of Minorities at First day of training. In second day, roles and responsibilities as HRDs and Peace builders, Difference between conflict and violence, strategy to violence reduction, peace actors identification, non-violence communication, core skills of peace builders, HRDs, divider and connector at is is session were conducted. Through the training Teachers and SMC members are well motivated and committed to keep, make and building peace in society. Group discussion, brain storming, game, acting, demo, pair group discussion were the major method of the training. Total 6 batches of training have been executed. Project Coordinator, Technical Coordinator, Area Coordinator were facilitated the training and field facilitators were cofacilitators of the training. Total 4 batches of training were implemented by the reporting period.

5. Student Forum Meeting: To enhance students' capacity in regard to make them human rights defenders, students forum meeting has been completed in 24 schools at Tala, Satkhira Sadar, Keshabpur and Monirampur upazilas. The mentor teachers have cooperated in facilitation the forum meeting at each school. Meeting covers participatory discussions on find out root causes of social problems and way forward, Good work identifications and planning, enlisting the child who at risk of child marriage, wall magazine publications were discussed in the meeting.

6. District CSO Meeting: District CSOs meeting held to enhance the quality of marginalized communities' life and strengthen the capacity of CSOs. The final committee of 25 members has been formed at each district comprising sub-district and district CSOs and is coordinated. This committee will contribute to improving the quality of life for marginalized communities and human rights status. During

the meeting, representatives of marginalized communities from the sub-district and district levels highlighted various social issues and proposed way forward and planning.

7. Village CSO Meeting: Under the HOPE project provision there are 48 number of village CSO meeting completed by the reporting period. In the meeting, Root causes of problem identifications and planning to way forward, RTI Application preparation, Nomination of union CSO member, enlistment of child whose at risk of child marriage, Massage of national hotline, as well as violence against women issues were discussed. Child marriage, dowry and its root caused were discussed also. Extreme poverty, lack of access to services, social exclusion, limited economic opportunities for women as it is also the reasons of barriers to women and girls development. Facilitators shown and inform the national hotline number for services. Field Facilitators were facilitated the meeting.

8. Union CSO Meeting: The meeting was held at Union level to coordinate and well organize the union CSOs. In the meeting CSO committee finalization, Social problems identifications, CSO roles and responsibilities, Preparation of Work plan, Member finalization as it is was discussed. There were total 24 number of quarterly Union CSO meeting held. Through the meeting participants prioritized the social problems. The major area of work plan was to combat VAWG includes Child marriage, drug and online gamble, reducing panic for water logging, Inclusion in safetynet benefits, awareness raising for peace building, application submission to authority with peoples demands as it is.

9. Upazila CSO Meeting : There were 2 nos. upazila CSO meeting has been done at Jashore. The Meeting was presidized the convener of CSO at each upazila. The meeting agenda was finalization of upazila cso committee, discussion on the local perspective of human rights abuse, gender inequality, social problem identification, CSO Planning also discussed in the meeting. During the meeting, representatives of marginalized communities from the sub-district and union levels highlighted their social problems and proposed to solving issues.

10. Dialogue meetings at union level: Dialogue meetings with service providers, authorities were held in Satkhira and Jashore at project site. The meeting was held in order to develop joint action plan to address social issues. In these meetings, joint action plans were adopted by local authorities and CSOs to resolve social issues identified at the union levels. The service providers were highlighted initiatives already undertaken to address certain issues and formulated plans to tackle other unresolved problems. Awareness building to combat VAWG, Citizen entitlements, Human rights, road repairing, awareness on health and hgyine, easy access to information of peoples as it is were the major tasks which they committed to implement. Union Paridsad Chairman, Secretary, Member of NNPC, Education, Safetynet distribution, Village Court were participated as authority in the meeting.

11. Dialogue meetings at Upazila level: Dialogue meetings with authorities were held in Satkhira Sadar, Tala, Keshabpur and Monirampur Upazila. The meeting was held in order to develop joint action plan to address social issues. In these meetings, joint action plans were adopted by local authorities and CSOs to resolve social issues identified at the Upazila levels. CSO member were presented identified social issues and recommendations. Through the discussion the authorities and service providers were highlighted initiatives already undertaken to address certain issues and formulated plans to tackle other unresolved problems. Awareness building to combat VAWG, Citizen entitlements, Human rights, road repairing, awareness on health and hygiene, easy access to information of peoples as it is were the major tasks

which they committed to implement. Upazila Nirbahi Officer, Women affair officer, Social welfare, Youth development officers were participated as authority in the meeting.

12. Public Event; Day Observation: In order to prevent social violence against women and establish human rights, RIB implemented Human Right Day & International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on occasion of observance the 16 days campaign in Satkhira Sadar, Tala, Keshabpur and Monirampur upazilas. This event was conducted in 24 schools within the project area. Total 48 nos. event includes Essay Contest on VAWG theme, Discussion, Procession, Poster, leaflet campaign has been implemented at school level.

13. Wall magazine Publications: Students in 24 no. of schools were participated to publish the wall magazine. Wall Magazine published with the thematic focus "Ensure safety for women and girls, build a violence-free society." Wall Magazine publications successfully carried out with the enthusiastic participation of teachers and students. Wall magazine gathered Story, Poem, Paragraph, Drawing, essay, feelings on child marriage, sexual harassment, dreams of girl's students as it is.

-----X-----

C. Seminar & Events of the RIB'S Project

C.1 : Title of the Seminar: "Enhancing Accountability and Transparency through Right to Information. Experiences and way forward"

Date: 11th September 2024

Venue: Bangladesh Parjatan Corporations, Agargaon

1. Introduction

The seminar "Enhancing Accountability and Transparency through Right to Information. Experiences and way forward "were organized by Research Initiatives Bangladesh on 11.09.2024, at Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation. The primary objective of the seminar was to explore and promote the role of RTI Act in shaping country's democratic atmosphere, discuss its importance in bringing systemic change, and suggest strategies to integrate RTI literacy effectively into our work to enhance transparency, accountability culture in Bangladesh.

The event was organized under a project titled "Advancing accountability and transparency through right to Information". The project is supported by National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Ms. Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression and Opinion, has joined the seminar as Chief Guest. There were valuable discussions and inputs from participants at the event which included RTI activists, human rights defenders, cultural activists, civil society members, members from INGOs, media personnel and others.

2. Objective of the Seminar

The key objectives of the seminar were:

- To disseminate findings of one-year project “Advancing Accountability and Transparency through Right to Information”
- To explore current trends, challenges, and opportunities related to use of RTI.
- To provide a platform for experts, activists, educators, policymakers, and civil society to discuss and share best practices.
- Based on RIB’s 14 years of experiences on promoting RTI, to propose effective methods and suggestion for integrating RTI literacy effectively into our work to enhance transparency, accountability culture.

3. Welcome address

In the inaugural speech, Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director, RIB gave her inaugural speech welcoming participants and emphasized the need for proper understanding and knowledge on Right to Information Act, which is regarded as an effective mechanism to bring systemic change by enhancing governance in the country. She also highlighted the significance of government officer’s training mindset change and infrastructure development to promote RTI literacy.

4. Keynote Address

The keynote address was delivered by Ruhi Naz, Assistant Director, RIB. The keynote paper titled *"Advancing Accountability and Transparency through the Right to Information"* explored the role of Right to Information (RTI) laws in enhancing transparency and accountability in 3 districts of Bangladesh. The speaker also shared statistical insights on the present situation of implementation of RTI law in 3 districts of Bangladesh.

Here are the key points:

RTI law is essential for promoting transparency and accountability in governance. Effective implementation of the law faces challenges due to governance issues and reluctance from authorities. The law empowers citizens to access information about government operations, making it a crucial tool for combating corruption, ensuring fair public services, and encouraging public participation. Despite the promise of RTI laws, fear of government retaliation limits their use by citizens. However, understanding of RTI's value is growing, particularly among marginalized communities.

Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) has actively worked to promote RTI awareness and application, particularly in rural areas. It engages citizens, government officials, and other stakeholders in various training and capacity-building activities. The project focused on improving public service delivery by empowering citizens to monitor government activities through RTI applications. Specific objectives included encouraging citizens to use RTI beyond personal needs, creating dialogue spaces between citizens and public officials, and fostering a sense of civic entitlement. RTI applications have had notable impacts, such as improving transparency in public service allocation and uncovering corruption in public projects. However, challenges such as resistance from authorities, incomplete responses, and intimidation of RTI users remain. There is a need for more advocacy, government accountability, and public awareness. Training for both citizens and officials, better RTI compliance, and greater support

from civil society organizations are crucial for the law's success. Overall, the paper emphasizes that continuous efforts are required to establish RTI as a key mechanism for promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance in Bangladesh.

5. Panel discussion session

Panelist 1

Zakir Hossain, Chief Executive, Nagorik Uddyog

The speaker in his speech focused on the need for RTI in Bangladesh and made a discussion on how this law singlehandedly help to improve governance system. His discussion focused on the key note paper. He not only appreciated RIB's effort to continuously keep trying to promote RTI but he felt that civil society in Bangladesh need to work with the similar focus. He believed that many NGOs and CSOs after being included as authority under RTI law, lost their will to promote RTI in Bangladesh. Mr. Hossain observed that not only government agencies, but civil society must incorporate RTI as cross cutting component in its work. He stressed the need of proactive disclosure. There is information on public services which people do not know, hence they cannot they cannot seek information. He also spoke of number of challenges that citizen encounter while using RTI. He pointed out lack of cooperation from government offices as main hurdle for RTI to have slower progress in Bangladesh, besides NGOs are mostly dependent on projects, that also hinders RTI progress in Bangladesh. followed by procedural hurdles at NGOAB in clearing projects are another setback for the NGOs trying to work with focus on RTI. Citizens also do not feel interest to use the law as some believe that its useless giving the political and administration context Bangladesh live in. Some, though remain fearful of the government authority, so they do not feel encourage to use the. Largely community remain unaware too regarding the potential benefits of using RTI.

Key Points Discussed:

- There is a need to create mass awareness on RTI and a transparent system must be in place to keep citizens informed of decisions and actions by government and NGOs.
- The challenges and success stories reflected from RIB's experiences need to be considered by other NGOs
- Institutions must be strengthened to take the law forward. There is a need to have continuation of projects to derive a long-lasting benefit.
- There is need to keep the process of creating RTI activists in the country because we need elite society in the country to get involved as change-makers who can use RTI for more large and national issues.

Panelist 2

Md. Rezaur Rahman, researcher and rights activist

The speaker in his speech focused on a study that RIB conducted on the impact of RTI led interventions in various districts of Bangladesh. The study was commissioned to him by RIB.

The speaker spoke about the success and challenges which were encountered during implementation of earlier interventions. The speaker said that, in Bangladesh a paradigm shift has taken place in creating marginalized communities' ownership through participatory process and use of RTI has played a significant role but unlike India where RTI law was created through ownership and individual's participation, in Bangladesh the law did not come in the same way. Hence it will be too early to claim that RTI has helped to build transparent and accountable culture in Bangladesh, that ownership has yet not created. There is success in certain sections like in the operation of SSNP, environment protection, building constructions, development projects, administrative issue and so on but use of RTI could not create much impact on protection of civil and political rights of people. He was of the opinion that, till date not much RTI intervention is done at national level focusing on issues that affects mass people. There are number of challenges in doing, the first thing is of the not-so-cooperating mentality of the service providers and policy makers. But this is also true that to achieve the full potentiality of RTI Act, focusing only on zonal issues will not help. He stressed that it will take time for RTI Act in Bangladesh to gain its momentum, but the process of demanding information has to be kept alive.

Key Points Discussed:

- There is a need to collect and systematically record local issues and information obtained through RTI interventions. such information needs to be analyzed and produced as a knowledge hub.
- The recruitment process of the Commissioners needs to be more transparent must come through public consultations.
- There is a need to make people more aware and create more activists. There must be realization that, use of RTI must not remain only on service benefit related issues but must scale up to focus on accountability and transparency as well.

6. Address by Chief Guest, Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression.

Ms. Irene Khan observed that on international sphere freedom of speech and Right to Information are recognized have similar standing. She said that people have a right to receive, share and search for information but where information empowers people, misinformation equally create number of challenges too. The people of Bangladesh achieved their right to access information in 2009 but these rights have been curtailed or restricted through unfair use of laws like Official Secrets Act, Digital Securities Act which became Cyber Securities Act in 2003. Similarly, data privacy and data protection rules become conflicting with the objective of RTI Act, which requires disclosure of information but in international laws there are no conflict between RTI Act and right to privacy because in such laws, it has been specifically mentioned that though some information might be of personal nature but the same can be disclosed if that involves greater public interests.

Ms. Khan during her speech mentioned number of challenges those exist, for example there are significant lacking in access to information for women through RTI. RTI is important for women's empowerment, they face problem because most women do not have digital literacy, there is lack of resources, education, there are structural inequality, religious and cultural

practices restraining women to access information. This lack of access to information by women prohibits their economic growth, affects their sexual reproductive health, and gender pay gap remain unaddressed.

Citing example of use and practice of RTI in other countries, Ms. Khan said in the countries where Information Commissions are playing strong role, in such countries, RTI implementation is doing well. She further said that it is universally seen, corporate companies do not become willing to disclose their information but the internal laws bound them to provide information to the public especially their loan operations and other activities that affect human rights and public interest. Many countries have laws that compel companies to put their information in the public domain. Especially the information related to environmental, hazardous substance, genetically modified organism and so on. More than 40 countries have laws requiring companies to keep information in the public domain. She observed, as difficult as it is to extract information from the government, it is even more difficult to extract accurate information from business companies. As they do not want to disclose their information, so the information they disclose, they do so in such a complex way that it is very difficult for the common people to understand.

Key Points Discussed:

- Internet is not accessible to everyone or available to everyone. 2.7 billion people in the world do not have access to information because they are not online. The people who don't have access to information are most vulnerable and women, PWD and minorities living in remote areas tend to be more vulnerable in this case. The main reason is affordability of internet access, it costs more in underdeveloped countries than it costs in developing countries. If investment is made in this sector so that everyone would have reasonable access to the internet then this could impact the access to information positively.
- Open government partnership policy should be introduced where government could partner with CSOs to facilitate reforms, research learnings and advocacy works. It's a cooperative process in which the government works with all kinds of partners to push things through.
- There is a need to put in place open contracting partnership for transparent procurement process, multi stake holder partnerships could take place. The more we partner the more we could benefit from right to information. Now we have the opportunity to take this Act higher.

7. Address by Special Guest, Dr. Iftakharuzzaman, Executive Director, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB).

In Bangladesh there is a gradual increase in the maturity of demand side under the RTI Act from 2009-2024. Those who use it regularly, now understand the true value of the law for a just and democratic society. In most of the countries where Right to Information law exist, it is regarded as soft law there. RTI Act 2009 promulgated in Bangladesh after a careful study of other laws and its implementation status in the region, despite that this law is termed weak because of inclusion of long list of exceptions under section 7. There is an immediate need to reform section

7, some important offices have been excluded too, however there is a requirement to disclose information in case of violation of human rights or corruption by such excluded organization.

Apparently, due to dictatorship practices by the immediate past regime in this country, enjoying of human rights and freedom of speech were turned into a criminal offence, people used to fear to dissent. Those who used Right to Information Act were subjected to torture and inhuman treatments. When any right is criminalized, the practice of that right becomes a matter of great struggle, laws like ICT, DSA, CSA were being used to suppress dissent voices and opinions.

Most of the institutions (not only public but private too) have not only failed to stick to its mandate of serving people of the country, but have been actively engaged in causing human rights violations and breach of trust. Such institutions including NGOs need to revive and reform to its true sense.

Key Points Discussed:

- The new egalitarian society we are talking about has various distinct rules and sub-rules in our society. There are many types of people whose ideologies and conceptual biases completely contradict the idea of an egalitarian society. Therefore, we must remain vigilant in establishing freedom of speech.
- We need to think about how to change the mindset of bureaucrats. Appointing people with a mentality of merely holding on to information will not be effective in the role of a commissioner. Simply providing training won't be enough unless there is a change in mindset.

8. Discussions by the designated speakers

The speakers in this segment highlighted key themes related to the use and challenges of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in Bangladesh, issues of transparency, accountability, and the broader struggle for freedom of speech and creative expression.

Discussant 1

Ayesha Akhter's Perspective (Advocate, BLAST)

Ayesha emphasized the importance of RTI in ensuring accountability and transparency in judicial processes. She shared examples from her legal experience, particularly in public interest cases where they have generated information through use of RTI which served as documentary evidence in courts and favorable verdicts were given. One notable case involved ensuring that orphans and children without parental identities could access education and this was possible because of use of RTI to support the case which challenged mandatory parental information in school registration forms.

Ayesha also pointed out that while RTI can be an effective tool, there are obstacles in judicial monitoring and the implementation of judgments. She cited a case about discriminatory provision questioning virginity of the bride in the "Kabinnama" (marriage contract), which took

years to be amended by a verdict, despite court ruling amendment was still not done in the document. BLAST used RTI to speed up the process of amendment. Her critique focused on the lack of strict punishments of the DOs for non-compliance, and Information Commissions soft attitude towards DOs and non-regard to the punishment provision. She concluded her discussion with a suggestion that reforms are needed to strengthen Information Commission, ensure effective implementation of RTI Act and hold officials accountable.

Discussant 2

Samiul Alam, RTI activist from North Bengal

Samiul Alam narrated his experience as RTI activist. He said that he and many others in North Bengal have evolved as RTI activist over the years. Samiul observed that submission of hundreds of RTI in his locality and nationwide have given them not only confidence but they have also developed deep knowledge on the rightful use of RTI. Initially, they faced restrictions from government officials. Many would give the threats or just avoid acknowledging them. Some would even use insulting words to discourage them but Samiul and their RTI team kept trying to push for the law to be used in north Bengal.

Discussant 3

Nishita Jaman Neha's Perspective (Coordinator, Anti-Discriminatory Student Movement):

Nishita highlighted the challenges activists face with access to information despite the existence of the RTI Act. She pointed to instances where law enforcement used personal information unethically against protesters, citing cases of harassment and censorship.

She emphasized the need for reforms to protect personal information and ensure that public interest information is accessible to all. Her experiences reveal how the misuse of information by authorities hinders transparency and limits the effectiveness of the RTI Act.

Discussant 4

Dibarah Mahboob's Perspective (Artist and Artistic Anthropologist):

Dibarah shared experiences from her involvement in the anti-discriminatory quota movement and her work in the creative sector. She drew parallels between government actions in Bangladesh and other oppressive regimes, discussing how freedom of expression is often suppressed, especially in the creative community.

She argued that the RTI Act and other reforms would remain ineffective if cultural censorship and the marginalization of women persist. Dibarah stressed the need to rebuild the creative sector, which she believes is a vital component of social progress and reform.

In summary, the participants shared a common concern about the limitations of the RTI Act and other structural reforms in Bangladesh. Ayesha focused on legal challenges and accountability,

while Nishita and Dibarah highlighted the broader societal issues of censorship, misuse of information, and the marginalization of dissenting voices. Together, their insights point to the need for more comprehensive reforms that not only strengthen legal mechanisms but also protect individual rights and promote freedom of expression.

8. Observations by the attendees during open discussion- direct quote

a. Khalid Hussian, CEO, Council of Minority

I work with the Bihari community. Once, despite having ID cards, we faced complications in obtaining passports for them. To resolve this, we used the Right to Information (RTI) Act. In 2015, with the help of BLAST, we filed an RTI application. In that application, we clearly mentioned that those residing in camps who possess ID cards had been recognized as Bangladeshi citizens by a High Court ruling in 2002 and 2003, but they were still not being issued passports. We submitted this appeal to the concerned ministry, seeking clarification on the policy. However, after receiving no response from the ministry, we approached the Information Commission. Upon approaching the commission, we were given a date for a hearing. On the day of the hearing, we were informed that it had been postponed because the ministry had requested more time to conduct further research on the issue.

Four days later, I received a four-page document from the Home Ministry stating that those who had become citizens with identification could indeed obtain passports. Using this information, we were able to help around 10 individuals from various camps get their passports.

b. Syeda Samara Mortada, Coordination and Partnerships Analyst, UN Women Bangladesh

She raised the issue of gender sensitivity, equality based on the use of data and its dissemination through disclosures.

c. Biplob Karmakar, RTI Activist

If someone has been subjected to torture by government intelligence agencies, it is a very disgraceful matter. It is common belief among us that, intelligence agencies are accessing our information using various tools and mechanisms. This should be stopped. The Information Commission of Bangladesh harasses people in many ways during complaint hearings. I believe the main reason for the low number of information requests is this harassment by the commissioners. During the hearings, instead of questioning the accused, the applicant is asked various questions and harassed. It is important that these issues come to light and be sorted out.

d. Afsana Binte Amin, Program Manager, NETZ Bangladesh

Common people are either not very aware of the right to information or do not use it much, which is a challenge. Another big challenge, particularly in the case of NGOs, is that since we follow a target-based approach in various projects, we don't focus much on civil and political rights, especially at the community level. We often work with simpler questions to meet our

targets. However, how can we highlight the importance of applying for information in the areas of civil and political rights? This is something that needs more attention.

When we conduct seminars, dialogues, or research in various forums, we often come across some excellent recommendations, but these are never published anywhere, so we don't get to know about them. Also, the research reports we conduct are not accessible to the public, so we cannot even view them. My suggestion is to publish these recommendations somewhere and to ensure that, after these discussions, we monitor whether these suggestions are being implemented."

e. Moushumi Biswas, Project Manager, Action Aid

This kind of seminar and programs that we conduct tend to be very effective. Representatives from various CSOs and NGOs are present here. However, representatives from the government institutions and Information Commission are not seen. Therefore, it is crucial to involve them in these kinds of initiatives. In a similar previous program on RTI, Chief Information Commission from the Information Commission committed to removing all forms of difficulties and discriminatory provisions under the RTI laws. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss to what extent those measures have been implemented and how accountable they can be held in this regard.

g. Nazrul Islam, RTI Activist

In our Nilphamari Sadar Upazila, there are three groups of RTI (Right to Information) activists. I work on behalf of the students, and we have a group of 30 members. We hold monthly meetings on the Right to Information Act, where we discuss various issues related to the law. In Nilphamari Sadar Upazila, we have filed applications on various issues and have benefited in many ways.

For instance, we first submitted an application to Nilphamari Hospital to find out how many types of medicines and in what quantities are provided to the public at the government hospital. We also filed an application requesting that ultrasounds for women be performed by female nurses, and we successfully received the desired outcome in this matter.

Additionally, we filed an application with the Department of Agriculture regarding seed allocations, but the official threatened us in various ways. Even the village police, union chairman, and secretary were used to intimidate us. We held a meeting with the chairman, explaining that we acted lawfully and that it is a right of the people. We stated that if they believed we were wrong, they should abolish the Right to Information Act because, as citizens of the state, it is our constitutional right. Since then, we have been receiving all the benefits and allocations from the Department of Agriculture on time and in the proper amounts.

9. Summary of suggestions and recommendations

Speakers and participants suggested and recommended strategies, if followed Bangladesh can better implement its RTI Act and foster a culture of transparency, accountability, and good governance

Increase RTI Awareness

- Mass awareness campaigns are crucial to inform the public about their right to access information and the benefits of the RTI Act. Many citizens, especially marginalized communities, remain unaware of how RTI can empower them.
- Government and civil society organizations (CSOs) should collaborate to raise awareness, especially in rural areas.

Improve RTI Implementation

- Continuous advocacy is required to improve cooperation from government offices, as many departments resist providing information or delay responses.
- NGOs should make RTI a cross-cutting component of their work, ensuring transparency across their projects.
- The recruitment process for Information Commissioners should be transparent, with public consultations to ensure accountability.

Promote Digital Literacy

Special attention should be given to enhancing digital literacy, especially for women, who often face difficulties accessing information due to digital barriers. This is crucial for their economic empowerment and addressing issues like gender pay gaps.

Address Gender Sensitivity

Data and information disclosure must account for gender sensitivities. Women, especially those in remote or conservative areas, face structural and cultural challenges in accessing information. Special policies and programs should be designed to overcome these barriers.

Strengthen Institutions

- Information Commissions should adopt stricter measures against officers who fail to comply with RTI requests. Training alone isn't enough; a shift in mindset is necessary.
- Government, NGOs, and CSOs should engage in Open Government Partnership policies to improve transparency, including transparent procurement processes.

Encourage Public Participation

- The RTI Act must be used beyond service-related benefits and extended to issues of national and civil rights importance, such as corruption, public health, and environment-related concerns.
- More RTI activists should be trained and encouraged to engage with systemic issues.

Combat Censorship and Misuse of Information

- Protect personal information to prevent its misuse by authorities or institutions, particularly in cases involving activists and protesters.
- Freedom of expression must be safeguarded, especially within creative sectors, where censorship stifles growth and societal progress.



C. 2 : Agriculture Labor Dialogue: Crisis and Way to Overcome (12th of November, 2024, at Hotel Omni Residency, Banani, Dhaka)

The dialogue began with a welcome address by Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director of RIB, followed by Vinod Koshti, Project Manager of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, South Asia, highlighting the need for fair wages, social protection, and equal opportunities for agricultural workers, especially women. Prof. M. M. Akash emphasized the challenges posed by mechanization and the necessity for alternative livelihoods for displaced workers. Gender disparities and inequitable policies were also discussed, with a focus on improving the quality of life for agricultural workers through access to education, healthcare, and basic services. Suraiya Begum, Project Coordinator, presented a keynote paper on the challenges faced by agricultural workers in Bangladesh, emphasizing the impact of modernization, landlessness, and rising costs. She highlighted the need for minimum wages, policy implementation, and NGO involvement to empower workers. Testimonies from agricultural workers, including Mithu Sakidar and Rina

Munda, underscored the harsh realities of inadequate wages, seasonal unemployment, and gender pay gaps, with women earning significantly less than men for similar work. Prof. Munirul Islam Khan pointed out the rise in landlessness and the struggles of marginal farmers, emphasizing the need for sustainable policies to address employment issues. He discussed the implications of capitalist development in rural areas and the emergence of new labor relations, stressing the importance of enhancing workers' bargaining power through mobilization and minimum wage policies. Sanjida Sultana, Additional Executive Director of Kormojibi Nari, shed light on the significant involvement of women in agriculture and their exclusion from labor laws and social protections. She called for better implementation of policies and unionization to address gender-specific challenges. Prof. Anu Mohammad reflected on the inequities in the agricultural sector, criticizing inadequate land reforms and the negative impacts of the Green Revolution, including health issues caused by pesticide use. Farida Akter, Adviser to the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, stressed the need for balanced policies to protect farmers' rights, health, and livelihoods. She highlighted issues like mismanagement of agricultural loans and the absence of institutional representation for seasonal workers. Anwar Hossain Reza, President of the Agricultural Laborers' Association, emphasized demands such as trade union rights, equal wages, pensions, and access to khas land for landless farmers. Dr. Abdul Latif, Vice-Chancellor of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, proposed recommendations to improve the welfare of agricultural workers, including minimum wage implementation, skill development training, and access to special loans. He also advocated for educational quotas for farmers' children and allocation of khas land to support agricultural activities. The dialogue concluded with Prof. M. M. Akash announcing the launch of a website to gather opinions and suggestions. The seminar aimed to compile actionable recommendations addressing agrarian reforms, land use, and the dignity of agricultural workers for policymaker consideration.





C.3 : Regional Conference on Interlinking Ecological Justice and Gender Justice (18th and 19th December,2024, Hotel Bengal Canary Park, Ghulshan-1, Dhaka)

DAY 1 : Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), in collaboration with Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung South Asia, successfully organized the Regional Conference on Interlinking Ecological Justice and Gender Justice at Hotel Bengal Canary Park, Gulshan-01, Dhaka. The conference brought together a diverse group of activists, academics, policymakers, and professionals from Bangladesh, India, and Nepal to explore the critical intersections between gender and environmental justice. Participants engaged in insightful discussions on key themes, including the interrelation between gender-based and environmental justice, the need for systemic transformations to advance justice, and the importance of gender-sensitive climate adaptation strategies. Through dynamic dialogues and knowledge exchange, the event highlighted the urgency of addressing ecological and gender justice in an integrated manner, paving the way for inclusive and equitable solutions to contemporary environmental and social challenges.

The opening remarks given by Dr. Shamsul Bari chairman of RIB, He highlighted RIB's journey since its establishment in 2002, initially focusing on poverty alleviation, particularly for the "missing poor"—marginalized communities often excluded from national development programs. Over the years, RIB expanded its research beyond income generation to examine the root causes of poverty, with support from Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS). This evolution led to deeper engagement with ecological and gender justice, recognizing their interconnectedness with poverty and social inequality. The Chairman acknowledged that the linkage between climate change, ecological justice, and gender justice was not initially evident but has become central to

RIB's research and advocacy. He commended the contributions of colleagues and partners like Vinod, whose efforts have helped open new research avenues in Bangladesh. Looking ahead, he stressed the need for regional cooperation to develop practical solutions for marginalized communities,

Vinod Koshti, Program Manager at Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS), expressed his appreciation for working with Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) and highlighted the value of Participatory Action Research in shaping policies. He emphasized that RLS, a German political foundation operating in 45+ countries, focuses on empowering marginalized communities and exploring alternative development models that challenge systemic inequalities. Koshti stressed the deep interconnection between ecological justice and gender justice, asserting that both issues share common root causes. He pointed out that ecological justice revolves around the relationships between species, while gender justice addresses hierarchies and systemic exclusion, making women particularly vulnerable. He argued that both forms of injustice stem from dominant power structures that marginalize communities. He reiterated RLS's commitment to system change over climate change, emphasizing the need for cross-border solidarity between the Global South and North to address these intertwined challenges.

Suraiya Begum, Director and Project Coordinator at RIB, emphasized the importance of collective efforts between governments, organizations, and communities to create a just and sustainable future. At the Regional Conference on Interlinking Ecological Justice and Gender Justice, Suraiya Begum, Director and Project Coordinator at Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), emphasized the urgency of addressing environmental and gender justice as two critical social issues shaping the future of the planet. She highlighted that ecological justice is rooted in fairness and equality in environmental conservation, resource distribution, and protection—especially for marginalized and vulnerable communities. Farming communities and agricultural workers bear the brunt of environmental harm, suffering from pollution, climate change, and resource depletion. As a result, eco-justice must be a key consideration in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure equitable environmental policies that safeguard both people and nature. On the other hand, gender justice calls for equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, irrespective of gender. It seeks to dismantle systemic discrimination, institutional inequalities, cultural biases, and restrictive gender norms that limit personal freedom and economic participation.

She further stressed the interconnection between ecological and gender justice, noting that climate change and environmental degradation intensify gender inequalities. Women, particularly in rural areas, depend on natural resources for survival yet often lack control over them due to patriarchal structures. Achieving both ecological and gender justice requires systemic change, inclusive policies, and sustainable solutions that address these deeply rooted inequalities.

The first session chaired by Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director, RIB, the theme of the session was Intersectionality of Gender and Ecology, two papers were presented at the first session, in absence of Dr. Mahbuba Nasreen, Professor, Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies, University of Dhaka her research assistant, Fahreen Hasan highlighted how women and marginalized communities face disproportionate vulnerabilities during disasters due to a combination of social, economic, and environmental factors. She emphasized that climate-induced disasters have gendered impacts, often increasing gender-based violence, economic instability, and displacement risks. One of the critical challenges she pointed out was the limited access to resources that women, particularly in rural areas, experience, including land ownership, financial credit, technology, and participation in decision-making processes. These barriers hinder their ability to adapt effectively to disasters and environmental changes. She stressed the importance of integrating gender perspectives into disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies to ensure equitable resilience-building efforts. Community-driven approaches, particularly those that empower local women leaders, can play a significant role in strengthening disaster preparedness and response. The second paper was presented by Dr. N. Manimekalai, Professor at the Centre for Women's Development. Her presentation focused on Mainstreaming Gender Concerns in Sustainable Agricultural and WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) Practices – Micro-Level Evidences from South India. Dr. Manimekalai highlighted the critical role of women in agriculture and natural resource management, emphasizing that despite their significant contributions, they often remain marginalized in decision-making processes. She presented micro-level evidence from South India, showcasing how gender-sensitive approaches in agriculture and WASH practices can lead to more sustainable and inclusive development outcomes.

She pointed out that women in rural communities face multiple challenges, including limited access to land, credit, technology, and training, which hinder their ability to adopt sustainable farming practices. However, initiatives that integrate gender perspectives into agricultural policies and programs have shown positive impacts on productivity, food security, and economic empowerment. Regarding WASH practices, she emphasized that women and girls bear the primary responsibility for water collection and sanitation management, making their participation in decision-making crucial. Following the presentation Amena Mohsin, Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka expressed her gratitude to RIB for the opportunity to speak at the regional conference. She highlighted the interconnectedness between ecological justice and gender justice, pointing out the marginalization of vulnerable groups, especially women, in both contexts. She emphasized the impact of unplanned urbanization in Dhaka and Bangladesh, where air and water quality issues are worsening. Mohsin also discussed the significant presence of marginalized women in informal sectors, particularly in the garment industry and domestic work, noting that while these sectors empower women, they also expose them to exploitation. She called for systemic changes and greater participation of women in decision-making processes to achieve both gender and ecological justice. On the other presentation Dr. Atiq Rahman, Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre

for Advanced Studies (BCAS), discussed the role of power dynamics in gender relations, particularly in agriculture. He highlighted that while women are often in subordinate positions in the family and society, their role is crucial in decision-making related to household survival and children's future. Rahman emphasized that gender and ecological justice must be integral parts of public discourse and societal transformation. He pointed out the changing signals within family structures and cultural practices, noting that gender justice and eco-justice should be central to future discussions on equity and justice in Bangladesh. The session chaired, Executive Director Meghna Guhathakurta emphasized that in order to achieve lasting change in both gender and environmental justice, it is essential to move beyond conventional thinking. She highlighted the importance of rethinking current frameworks and adopting a more progressive approach. According to her, transformative justice needs to be incorporated into policies in a way that addresses the root causes of inequality and environmental degradation. This shift would ensure that both gender equality and ecological sustainability are integrated into policies in a manner that leads to real, systemic change, benefiting marginalized communities and ensuring a more just and equitable future.

The second session starts themed on Systemic Change for Justice, Professor M. M. Akash, a Board Member at RIB, noted that addressing the issues of gender and ecological justice is complex, involving various interconnected systems such as economic, social, family, and ecological realities. He introduced two key papers presented in the session. The first, from Nepal, titled "The Structural Barriers to Equitable Solar Irrigation in Nepal," explores the realities of solar irrigation and its challenges in ensuring justice, specifically highlighting the need for equitable access. The second paper, presented by Md. Jahid-Al- Mamun, focused on "Climate Change and Gender Vulnerability in Bangladesh: Revisiting Legal Protections for Women in Bangladesh." This paper examines the legal frameworks designed to protect women and marginalized groups, particularly in the context of climate change, while highlighting the gap between legal provisions and their practical implementation. Md. Jahid-Al-Mamun, a Lecturer in the Department of Law at the University of Dhaka, presented a paper titled "Climate Change and Gender Vulnerability in Bangladesh: Revisiting Legal Protections for Women in Bangladesh." In his paper, he analyzed the legal frameworks in Bangladesh that are intended to

protect women and marginalized groups from the impacts of climate change. He pointed out that while Bangladesh's constitution and various laws provide rights to women and vulnerable communities, these protections are often not fully realized at the ground level. He discussed how climate change disproportionately affects women, especially in rural areas, and how current legal provisions fail to adequately address the unique challenges faced by women in coping with environmental changes. The paper also highlighted the gaps in policy implementation and enforcement, which exacerbate gender vulnerability in the face of climate-related challenges. In his conclusion, Jahid-Al-Mamun called for a comprehensive review of these legal protections, urging that they be updated and enforced to better safeguard women's rights and empower them to respond effectively to climate change. The second paper, "Structural Barriers to Equitable

Solar Irrigation in Nepal," was presented by Dr. Darshan Karki, a researcher and social scientist at the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) in Nepal. In his presentation, Dr. Karki focused on the challenges and systemic barriers that hinder the equitable distribution and access to solar irrigation technologies in Nepal, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. She highlighted that while solar irrigation has the potential to revolutionize agricultural practices and improve water access for farming communities, several structural barriers prevent its widespread adoption. These include issues related to the affordability of the technology, the lack of supportive policies at the local level, and the unequal distribution of resources that favor wealthier farmers and communities over the most vulnerable. Dr. Karki discussed the socio-economic factors that create these disparities, such as limited access to credit for smallholder farmers, inadequate training on solar irrigation systems, and the dominance of traditional, non-sustainable irrigation practices. She emphasized the need for targeted interventions, including policy reforms, better access to financing, and increased awareness, to ensure that solar irrigation benefits all farmers, especially those in marginalized areas.

Professor Firdous Azim discussed the connection between gender and climate change, emphasizing that women, especially in Bangladesh, are disproportionately vulnerable due to their roles in agriculture, household management, and family responsibilities. She stressed the importance of incorporating women in climate adaptation policies and legal protections, noting that while frameworks like Sidar provide some protections, they have limitations in practice. She also highlighted the barriers women face in accessing technologies such as solar irrigation due to land ownership issues and structural inequalities.

Anu Mohammad, former professor at Jahangirnagar University, reinforced the idea that vulnerability to climate change is shaped by social factors like class, ethnicity, and religion. He criticized Bangladesh's development model for lacking structural transformation and for exacerbating these vulnerabilities. Anu Mohammad also pointed out the gap between international climate commitments and their practical implementation, citing the disconnect between government policies and the marginalized communities they aim to help.

Vinod Koshti, Program Manager at Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS) emphasized the important role women and other genders play in understanding and connecting with nature. He highlighted the need to move beyond the conventional gender-focused approach and urged for a stronger, more articulated approach to break existing chains. He stressed the government's role in fostering this change and called for experts to contribute new perspectives and ideas to create meaningful transformations.

The Chief Guest, Shireen Huq, Chairperson of the National Commission for Women's Reform, emphasized the critical importance of women's empowerment in her speech. She acknowledged the various perspectives and ideas presented during the conference, expressing her commitment to bringing them to the Commission's attention. She further mentioned that the Commission would assess the feasibility of translating these insights into actionable policies at the

governmental level. This reflects her dedication to ensuring that women's issues are addressed through effective and sustainable policy changes. Another member of the Women's Reform Commission, Dr. Halida Hanum, emphasized the importance of women's health in her address. She discussed the significant challenges women face regarding access to healthcare and how improving their health is fundamental to their overall empowerment. Dr. Hanum stressed that addressing health disparities among women, especially in marginalized communities, is essential for fostering gender equality. She called for greater attention to the integration of women's health needs into national policies and the development of programs that can help bridge the existing gaps in healthcare access and services for women.

After lunch the final session themed on Climate Change Adaptation Agroecology & Gender, the session chaired by Zakir Hossain, Chief Executive, Nagorik Uddyog. Ms. Ishita Mehta, the Communication Officer at RLS, delivered a presentation on the topic of "Women and Climate Change: Understanding the Relationship." She highlighted the disproportionate impact of climate change on women, particularly in vulnerable communities. She explained that women, especially in developing countries, face greater challenges as they are often primary caregivers, responsible for managing household resources like water, food, and fuel. Climate change exacerbates these roles, leading to increased workloads and heightened vulnerability. She also pointed out the intersectionality of gender and climate change, noting that women in marginalized sectors, including rural and low-income women, experience more significant adverse effects. These include limited access to resources, education, and decision-making processes regarding climate action and policies. Dr. M Nazim Uddin, Senior Scientific Officer at RARS, BARI, Chattagram, presented on "Emboldening Women in Social Behavior Changes (SBC) for Safe Pesticide Use and Nature-Positive Actions (NAPA) through Social, Ecological, and Technological Systems." In his presentation, Dr. Uddin discussed how empowering women, especially in rural and agricultural communities, can lead to safer pesticide use and more sustainable agricultural practices. He explained that women often play a central role in agricultural work but face challenges due to limited access to training and information on safe pesticide use. By focusing on Social Behavior Changes (SBC), he suggested, women can become key agents of change in promoting safer pesticide practices and nature-positive actions that benefit the environment and communities. Dr. Uddin also stressed the importance of integrating Social, Ecological, and Technological Systems (SETS) to address these challenges. Dr. Indu Sharma, Postdoctoral Fellow in Inclusive Governance and Nutrition-Sensitive Agri-food Systems at IWMI, presented on "Inclusive Water Governance in Coastal Bangladesh: Implications for Capture Fishers."

In her presentation, Dr. Sharma highlighted the challenges faced by small-scale and traditional fishers in coastal Bangladesh due to water governance policies that often exclude their voices. She emphasized that inclusive governance is crucial for ensuring equitable access to water resources, especially for marginalized fishing communities who depend on capture fisheries for their livelihoods. She pointed out that coastal regions are highly vulnerable to climate change, salinity intrusion, and commercial interventions, which disproportionately affect small-scale

fishers. Large-scale aquaculture, shrimp farming, and infrastructure projects often take precedence over the needs of traditional fishers, leading to displacement, loss of income, and food insecurity.

Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director of RIB, commented on Ms. Ishita Mehta's presentation by emphasizing that while the presentation effectively highlights the intersectionality between gender and climate change, it is crucial to go beyond portraying women solely as vulnerable. She stressed that women are also agents of change, actively leading climate adaptation efforts in their communities. Integrating their voices into national and international climate policies can shift the narrative from vulnerability to resilience. Additionally, she pointed out the need for policy interventions that ensure women's participation in climate governance, particularly in decision-making at local and national levels.

Dr. Mahmudul Islam, Director of Strategic Partnership and Business Development at BSAFE Foundation, Dhaka, provided his insights on Dr. M Nazim Uddin's research on Social Behavior Change (SBC) for pesticide safety and nature-positive actions. He acknowledged the relevance of integrating Social, Ecological, and Technological Systems (SETS) but emphasized that a stronger policy and institutional framework is necessary for long-term impact. Women farmers often lack access to training and resources, and bridging this gap should be a priority. While behavioural change at the individual level is critical, he pointed out that structural barriers, such as market-driven pesticide dependence and weak regulatory enforcement, must also be addressed.

Rowshan Jahan Moni, Deputy Executive Director of ALRD, commented on Dr. Indu Sharma's presentation, highlighting that the exclusion of small-scale and traditional fishers from water governance policies is not just a governance failure but a human rights concern. She noted that women in fishing communities face both environmental and social barriers, yet they are rarely recognized as stakeholders in water resource management. While the presentation made a strong case for community-led governance models, she questioned how such models could receive institutional support. She also pointed out that legal frameworks for equitable water access exist, but their implementation remains weak.

Zakir Hossain, Chief Executive of Nagorik Uddyog, made the final statements, emphasizing the necessity of integrating gender perspectives into climate adaptation, agroecology, and governance. He reinforced the call for stronger articulation, policy implementation, and multi-stakeholder collaboration to address these critical issues effectively.

Day-2 : The final day of the regional conference on Interlinking Ecological Justice and Gender Justice began with a welcome speech by Syed Navid Anjum Hasan, Documentation and Training Officer at RIB. In his address, he mentioned that the day's program would feature two sessions, followed by the official opening of Kobi Gaaner Lorai. The first session chaired by Zarina Rahman Khan Professor, Public Administration, University of Dhaka (Ret.). She mentioned the

importance of ecological and gender justice context. This session featured on Integrating Gender Equity and Ecological Sustainability for Resilient Futures. Professor Monirul Islam Khan from the Department of Sociology at Independent University, Bangladesh, presented his paper titled "Environmental Disaster and Gender Inequality: Selective Sociological Insights Contextualizing Bangladesh." In his presentation, he explored the complex relationship between environmental disasters and gender inequality, highlighting how socio-economic vulnerabilities disproportionately affect women and marginalized genders in disaster-prone areas of Bangladesh. He provided key sociological insights into the structural inequalities that exacerbate the impacts of climate change and environmental hazards, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies and community-driven solutions to ensure resilience and justice for all. The next paper was presented by Renu Thakur, Chief Functionary of ARPAN, Uttarakhand, India. She highlighted the intersectionality of gender and ecology, examining how environmental degradation disproportionately affects women and marginalized communities. In her presentation, she emphasized how gender inequality not only exacerbates the vulnerabilities of these groups but also hinders efforts toward ecological sustainability. She discussed the critical role women play in environmental conservation and resource management, advocating for gender-inclusive policies and grassroots initiatives to ensure both ecological and social justice.

The commentary by S. Aminul Islam and Dr. Zobaida Nasreen on the two presented papers emphasizes the significant contributions these papers make to the ongoing discourse on gender and sustainability. They recognize the papers' strengths in addressing the crucial intersections between environmental disasters, gender inequality, and ecological sustainability. However, they also suggest areas for further exploration, which could deepen the analysis and strengthen the overall argument.

Their suggestion to engage more in-depth with policy implementation gaps, indigenous knowledge systems, and feminist ecological perspectives is particularly valuable, as these elements often play a pivotal role in shaping the effectiveness of gender-responsive climate policies and community-driven resilience efforts. They also advocate for the inclusion of transnational and local climate movements in the conversation, highlighting how different scales of action interact with gender justice in the context of environmental degradation.

In essence, the commentary calls for a move beyond theoretical frameworks and into the realm of practical, actionable strategies for climate justice, emphasizing the need for gender-responsive approaches to achieve ecological sustainability. This would ensure that the voices and needs of marginalized communities, particularly women, are fully integrated into climate action strategies at both local and global levels.

The chair, Zarina Rahman Khan, Professor of Public Administration at the University of Dhaka (Ret.), concluded the session by emphasizing the critical need to integrate gender equity and ecological sustainability in addressing the challenges posed by environmental disasters. She highlighted that a comprehensive approach is required to bridge the gap between gender justice

and ecological justice, ensuring that marginalized communities, particularly women, are empowered and included in the decision-making processes related to climate resilience.

The second session was chaired by Rajiv Kumar, Project Manager at RLS, and focused on the theme "Youth-Driven Community Solutions: Using Media to Link Ecological, Gender, and Climate Justice." During this session, discussions centered around the pivotal role of youth in advocating for ecological, gender, and climate justice. Emphasizing the power of media as a tool for raising awareness and driving social change, the session highlighted how young people can leverage digital platforms, storytelling, and grassroots movements to connect these critical issues and promote solutions. The session underscored the importance of youth engagement in shaping the future of climate action and social justice, with a focus on empowering young voices to lead the charge for a sustainable and equitable world. Fariha S. Aumi, Chair of Brighters, addressed the topic "How Can Media Amplify Youth Voices in Gender and Climate Justice Issues?" in her words She emphasized the powerful role of media in raising awareness and empowering young people to become key advocates for gender and climate justice. She discussed how youth voices, when amplified through various media platforms, can drive societal change and influence policies related to gender equality and climate action. She highlighted the potential of social media, digital storytelling, and youth-led media campaigns in bridging the gap between youth activism and global advocacy, advocating for a more inclusive approach to address pressing environmental and social issues. Sohanur Rahman, Executive Coordinator of Youth Net Global, shared the inspiring story and experiences behind the founding of Youth Net for Climate Justice. In his presentation, he highlighted how grassroots movements led by young activists have successfully gained attention through media engagement. He discussed the challenges and opportunities faced while mobilizing youth for climate action and gender justice. He provided real-life examples of how local initiatives, such as community-led climate campaigns, storytelling, and digital advocacy, have amplified the voices of marginalized youth and influenced broader climate policies. Salauddin Ahmed Reza, Broadcast Journalist at Jamuna TV, delivered an insightful discussion on "How Can Mass Media and Social Media Create Impactful Climate Justice Narratives?" He emphasized the crucial role of traditional and digital media in shaping public perceptions, influencing policy decisions, and mobilizing communities around climate justice.

He highlighted how mass media, including television and print journalism, can provide in-depth reporting on climate change impacts, environmental policies, and grassroots movements, bringing the voices of vulnerable communities to a wider audience. Meanwhile, social media serves as a

powerful tool for real-time storytelling, citizen journalism, and advocacy, enabling youth and activists to amplify climate justice narratives, counter misinformation, and engage with policymakers directly.

Shathy Jomoddar, Project Assistant at UNDP, emphasized that over the past five years, women have been instrumental in climate action, particularly at the grassroots level. Their leadership in climate movements has expanded, with more women-led initiatives in sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and disaster risk reduction. Women's organizations have strengthened climate justice advocacy, influencing policies and decision-making. Despite progress, challenges like limited access to funding and leadership opportunities persist, especially for vulnerable women. To address this, organizations are promoting gender-inclusive policies, supporting women-led enterprises, and fostering community-based solutions. Women's leadership in disaster preparedness and climate resilience is ensuring a more just and sustainable future.

Media plays a crucial role in amplifying Indigenous voices, shaping public perception, and influencing policies. Satej Chakma, Executive Editor of Indigenous Peoples News Bangladesh, emphasizes that media is both a tool for advocacy and a means of preserving Indigenous cultures, languages, and rights. However, mainstream media often misrepresents or marginalizes Indigenous narratives, reinforcing biases and excluding them from critical discussions. Indigenous-led media initiatives are essential in reclaiming their stories, challenging dominant narratives, and mobilizing global support. Strengthening Indigenous voices in journalism is not just about representation—it is about justice, empowerment, and systemic change.

Syed Navid Anjum Hasan, Documentation & Training Officer at Research Initiatives Bangladesh, shared success stories of ecological justice from Satkhira and Bogura, highlighting community-led solutions. His speech included insights from Ansar Ali, a PAR farmer, who shared firsthand experiences of sustainable farming and resilience. Navid emphasized the role of participatory action research in empowering farmers, promoting agroecology, and restoring ecological balance. The discussion underscored how local knowledge, combined with scientific approaches, is driving positive change in these regions, ensuring food security and environmental sustainability. Ansar Ali, a PAR (Participatory Action Research) farmer, highlighted the transformative role of PAR farmers in advancing ecological justice. He shared how, through participatory action research, farmers have not only improved their agricultural practices but also regained control over their land and resources. Ansar emphasized the importance of collaboration between farmers, researchers, and local communities to find sustainable, context-specific solutions. PAR farmers, like himself, play a key role in integrating traditional knowledge with modern agricultural practices, leading to more resilient and eco-friendly farming systems.

At the close of the session, Rajiv Kumar, Project Manager at RLS, emphasized the importance of youth-driven solutions in addressing the interconnected issues of ecological, gender, and climate justice. He commended the contributions of all speakers, highlighting the power of media in amplifying youth voices and the need for inclusive, collaborative approaches to tackle global challenges. Rajiv reinforced the crucial role of young people in shaping the future through digital platforms, grassroots movements, and policy advocacy.

The final session, which began after lunch, featured a captivating performance of Kabi Ganner Lorari, followed by a screenplay presentation titled Gambhira on Ecological Agriculture. This session focused on the intersection of ecological agriculture and gender justice, creatively illustrating how traditional art forms like Kabi Gaan (a form of Bengali folk music) can raise awareness and inspire action on environmental and social issues.

The screenplay, Ecological and Gender Justice: The Battle of Kobi Gaan, blended cultural storytelling with contemporary issues, highlighting the struggles of communities facing ecological degradation and gender inequality.

The session, chaired by Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director of RIB, explored the connection between ecological justice, culture, traditions, and agriculture. Speakers included filmmakers and artists who highlighted how these elements intertwine to shape sustainable practices and environmental justice.

Shameem Akhtar, Shabnam Ferdousi, and Sandip Kumar Mistry, all filmmakers, shared their perspectives on using film as a powerful tool for raising awareness about ecological issues and advocating for change. Fareha Zeba, an artist, discussed the role of art in reflecting cultural values and raising consciousness about the environmental impact of agricultural practices. Samsul Islam Shopon, a filmmaker and eco-activist, emphasized how documentaries and visual storytelling can engage people emotionally and drive collective action for ecological and gender justice.

The session highlighted the potential of creative expression in bridging the gap between traditional knowledge and contemporary environmental challenges, fostering deeper engagement and action towards a more sustainable future.

In the closing segment of the event, Suraiya Begum shared her overall recommendations, stressing the need for continued collaboration between youth, media, and local communities to tackle ecological, gender, and climate justice issues. She recommended fostering inclusive dialogues that integrate cultural, traditional, and scientific approaches to create sustainable solutions. Suraiya emphasized the importance of elevating marginalized voices, especially women and Indigenous peoples, ensuring they are central to decision-making processes in climate and environmental justice initiatives. She also called for increased support for grassroots movements and emphasized the critical role of education and capacity-building in empowering the next generation of leaders.

Following this, Syed Navid Anjum Hasan delivered the vote of thanks, expressing gratitude to all the speakers, participants, and organizers for their valuable contributions to the event. He thanked the panelists for sharing their expertise, acknowledging their efforts in advancing ecological justice and climate action. Navid also appreciated the engagement of youth and community members, recognizing their role in shaping a more sustainable future. He closed by

highlighting the importance of continued collaboration and collective action to address the pressing challenges of our time.



From Left to Right Vinod Koshti, Program Manager RLS, Honourable Chairman of RIB, Dr. Shamsul Bari and Project coordinator Suraiya Begum



Group Photo

C.4 : National Seminar on Bridging the Gap: Assessing Access to Public Services for Minorities, Women, PWD, and Youth. Challenges and Pathways Forward at Aloki, 211 Gulshan-Tejgaon Link Road.

The event was organized in Dhaka with 75 participants coming from Dhaka and 8 districts of Bangladesh namely Chattagram, Bandarban, Naogaon, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Kushtia. There was representation of 60% women as well as representatives from minority community and persons with disability joined the event. Social Welfare and Women's Affairs Advisor Sharmeen Murshid and other government authorities attended the event. The event shed a spotlight on the specific barriers these groups (women, minority, youth and PWD) face in accessing public services, such as education, healthcare, and social protection. Presentation of evidence-based findings in the form of report helped stakeholders understand the depth and nuances of the issues, moving beyond anecdotal accounts. This public event had set expectations for stakeholders to act on the findings. Women, minorities, youth, and persons with disabilities could share their lived experiences, empowering them and giving them a stake in decision-making. Civil society organizations, experts and advocacy groups during the event stressed on the need to collaborate and strategize on sustained campaigns for change. Bringing together government officials, NGOs, community leaders, and international development partners had fostered partnerships for implementing recommendations. Discussions at the event could lead to innovative, inclusive solutions that involve diverse perspectives as well as sharing case studies and successful interventions from other contexts had also inspired similar initiatives.

Personal stories and testimonials presented during the event had humanized the data, making it relatable and impactful. Findings specific to particular regions or demographics had inform local government and grassroots initiatives too.

This event served as a catalyst for systemic changes, fostering a more inclusive society where women, minorities, youth, and persons with disabilities have equitable access to public services. It can also contribute strengthen Bangladesh's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

-----X-----

D.Case Study

D. 1 : Impact of RTI intervention (Case studies)

1. Reconstruction is required for the Syedpur Upazila Parishad's boundary wall in the Nilphamari district. During this, a new UNO was transferred from the nearby Parvatipur upazila to Syedpur. After taking over the office he assigned to painters and lime workers from Parvatipur to renovate the wall, without consulting with officials or circulating a tender. After becoming aware of the situation on May 2, 2024, Saidpur information rights activists Masood Parvez and Sohel Rana filed an RTI application to the UNO office wanting the following information: "Expenses are granted from which sector of Upazila Parishad for the ongoing renovation work of boundary wall of Syedpur Upazila Parishad of Nilphamari district. I would like a copy of the report detailing the decision-making process for this renovation work". The Upazila Nirbahi Officer quickly halted operations upon receiving the RTI application, issued a tender, and completed all processing with transparency.

Transparency and accountability have been ensured due to the quick action of RTI activists. This is how RTI activists are working to ensure transparency and accountability in state affairs, even at risk.

2. RTI Request and Intimidation at Syedpur Government Biggan (Science) College

RTI Request and Initial Response:

Afshar Ali, a member of the Syedpur Students; RTI Group, filed an RTI application on September 25, 2024, seeking information from the principal of Syedpur Government Biggan (Science) College.

The information sought included: Details of the decision and tender related to the expansion of the

Principal's office. A list of all materials received by the college in the 2024-2025 fiscal year. The college's policy on private tutoring on campus. Following the application, some individuals from

the college called Afshar Ali to meet them at Pancha Matha More in Syedpur Bazar. When he informed his colleague, Shanto Basfor, and a RIB representative about this, they advised him to directly obtain the information. However, Afshar Ali declined to meet with the college officials. Subsequently, these individuals offered Afshar Ali money to withdraw his application. Threats and Intimidation: When Shanto Basfor learned about this incident, he mentioned that Afshar Ali was seeking money. Subsequently, Afshar Ali began to face threats and pressure from local political leaders and the municipal councilor. The councilor summoned Afshar Ali and warned him of legal consequences for going against government officials. Fearing for his safety, Afshar Ali informed the RIB representative about the threats. Later, Afshar Ali and his colleagues decided to file similar applications in other districts to prevent retaliation.

Attack on Family: A day later, A member from a leading political party member with the members of the youth wing of the same party visited Afshar Ali's home, threatening his family and physically assaulting his elder brother. The entire neighborhood was disturbed by this incident. Shanto Basfor requested other members to refrain from filing applications in other districts, fearing for the safety of himself and Afshar Ali.

Reaction of the RTI Team: This incident deeply affected the Syedpur RTI team, and many members contacted the RIB representatives. The representative requested other members to refrain from filing further applications. However, Astahrul, an RTI activist from Dinajpur, sent an email application, but there was no response.

3. Absent Sports Teacher Kashi Kumar Das and other concerned individuals from Dinajpur filed a formal complaint with the Dinajpur Secondary Education Officer on August 9, 2024. They alleged that the sports teacher at Chirirbandar Women's Degree College was consistently absent and neglecting their duties, including physical training (PT) sessions. In response to the complaint, the Secondary Education Officer directed the college principal to provide documentation, such as attendance registers and PT class records, to verify the teacher's attendance and performance. However, the college was unable to furnish the required information due to inadequate record-keeping. As a result of this oversight, the sports teacher was issued a show-cause notice by the college authorities to explain their absence and non-compliance with their duties.

D.2 : Success Story

1. Seeds Exchange to the Local School Farmers

The transformation of farmers has been remarkable after gaining knowledge from local schools, enabling them to take proactive roles in preserving and sharing indigenous seed varieties. Recently, they have been encouraging fellow farmers to exchange and distribute local seeds, strengthening seed sovereignty and agroecological resilience. As part of this effort, traditional

rice seeds were recently distributed among farmers in Narchi and Shalukgari villages of Sariakandi, Bogura. The distributed varieties included Subash, Sonali Paijam, Ritu Paijam, Kalo Badsha Bhog, and Mal Shira—each known for its unique adaptability, taste, and resilience to local climate conditions. During the distribution, a PAR farmer from Noyapara village in Bogura explained the characteristics of these rice varieties, highlighting their nutritional benefits, pest resistance, and suitability for sustainable farming practices. Farmers received the seeds with great interest, recognizing their potential in ensuring food security and reducing dependency on commercial hybrid seeds. This initiative reflects the growing impact of community-led efforts in preserving traditional agricultural knowledge and fostering a self-sufficient farming culture.



2. Local Rice Harvesting

After the Local School, participants from Shalukgari, Narchi, Harina, Chokibari, and Boithadanga villages in Sariakandi Bogura reached a consensus on the significant success of local seeds. They observed that the local rice seeds had a much higher germination rate—around 90%—compared to the packaged seeds, which only showed a 40% germination rate. This stark difference highlights the effectiveness of traditional seed varieties in local conditions, demonstrating their resilience and adaptability to the specific climate, soil, and farming practices of the region. The higher germination rates further reinforce the importance of preserving and promoting local seeds for sustainable agricultural practices and food security.



The RIB Secretariat / 2024

Program Department	
Name	Designation
Meghna Guhathakurta	Executive Director
Suraiya Begum	Director
Ruhi Naz	Assistant Director (Program)
Rashida Akter	Senior Program officer
Md. Matiur Rahman	Senior Program Officer
Babul Chandra Sutradhar	Program Officer
Shahinul Islam	Associate Coordinator (NED Project)
Syed Navid Anjum Hasan	Documentation & Training Officer (RLS Project)
Admin Department	
Nasima Pervin	Deputy Director (Admin & Finance)
Kazi Ziauddin	Finance Officer (RLS Project)
Supporting staff	
Md. Zakir Hossain	Driver
Md. Mannan	Driver
Yasmin	Cleaner