



FEDERATIONS COMBAT INJUSTICE IN SOCIETY

Through its Social Organisation Programme, RDRS ensures that empowerment of the rural poor is based on strong foundations – in this case, the community-based Union Federations. It is through these institutions that RDRS delivers its social, economic and environmental messages and resources and promotes good governance and respect for human rights in villages and towns across the working area. Through its 310 Federations RDRS is assisting landless people for their land rights, protecting against human trafficking, reducing social and domestic violence, decreasing gender discrimination and standing up for vulnerable women.

These stories show successes of Union Federations in establishing human rights.

Union Federation combats human trafficking

Human trafficking (of women and children) has spread out across the world. It rivals the drugs and illegal arms trade as one of the most profitable forms of illegal activity. Its high profit, low penalty nature makes it attractive to small criminal rings and large-scale organised crime, forcing a growing number of people into slavery around the world.



Trafficking is a serious concern in Bangladesh, especially in border areas. About ten thousand women and children are trafficked from Bangladesh every year. One of the poorest countries in the world, poverty provides traffickers with people who have no alternatives for survival. Traffickers make lucrative offers or lure them into profitable work and comfortable life; and then lead them to slavery.

On the 18th June 2008, 22 young boys were being moved from Sailpara village of Jaldhaka upazila (sub district) in Nilphamari District in northern region of Bangladesh. Along with some local unscrupulous persons, the traffickers promised the boys lucrative work in Dhaka, the capital city. However the whole exercise was completely false though the boys had not yet realised this. Extreme poverty made the offer of employment attractive.

The Youth Forum of Sholmari Union Federation suspected the traffickers. Members of the forum along with some Federation leaders followed the traffickers who were taking the boys to Dhaka by microbus. The alerted traffickers tried to escape but the young people stopped them. The boys were rescued and returned to their parents.

This courageous initiative by Sholmari Federation and its youth wing was recognised by the local government. Perhaps their action will make other traffickers wary of similar crimes in future. It will also increase awareness of the dangers of trafficking in these poor rural areas.

Landless family successful in land claim

The vast majority of landless people are unaware that they are eligible to make a claim to *khas* land. Establishing rights over the *khas* (state owned) land is a complex process open to conflict and corruption. Flaws in the land administration system also significantly contribute to violent land-based disputes. Women who are divorced or widowed are further exposed to exploitation of their land rights by their husband's family, and in many cases are left destitute when unable to assert their rights. Similarly, there are many cases where sons do not allow their sisters to inherit their legal share of land after the death of their father. Disabled persons are also deprived from their land rights.



Azizur Rahman is a physically disabled and landless person lives in Mostabi village in Gokunda union of Lalmonirhat District. For five years, along with his four-member family, he had been living on other person's land. The person took pity on him and allowed him to live there.

Azizur is a member of Gokunda Federation. In 2006, with assistance from the Federation, he applied for 2.5 decimals of *khas* land through union council (lowest tier of the local government) to the Government. Although his application was successful and he was allocated the tiny plot in June 2006, he could not gain access - a fairly common story.

That is because the plot was illegally controlled and used by a retired government officer and another person. To resolve this, Azizur Rahman tried going through the local mediation process on several occasions but without success so he approached the Federation again for help. He went to Federation for assistance in recovering this allocated land. The Federation took this seriously and communicated with the Upazila land office.

Gokunda Federation communicated with local government and applied to the land authority to take necessary action immediately. Eventually the government took action and sent a surveyor to demarcate the land in question. Backed by the Federation, Azizur Rahman gained access to his new plot of land on 25 December 2008 in presence of Federation leaders, villagers and government authority.

Bilkis freed from the evils of dowry



The custom of paying a dowry to the future husband's family when a daughter is married is illegal in Bangladesh, but is still practised by most families in rural areas. Payment is normally upwards from 20,000 (equivalent to USD 294) taka. Dowry-related violence is a common feature in Bangladesh, affecting the lives of many women. Other than specific acts of violence such as killing, torture, throwing of acid and the like, dowry demands affect the lives of women socially and culturally in a much deeper manner.

Bilkis, is a girl from a very poor family living in Barogaon union of Thakurgaon District. She studied up to Class IV and was married at a very young age. After marriage, the real problems began in her life. The torture in her life began.





Her husband and mother-in-law had demanded a substantial sum of money, 30,000 (equivalent to USD 441) taka, as dowry. It was not possible for her poor father to manage this money and so her husband and mother-in-law began torturing her mentally and then physically.

Bilkis was seriously injured by this cruel physical and mental torture. First, following customary practice, Bilkis appealed to local elites for a solution to this problem, but no one acted.

Eventually, Barogaon Union Federation stood up for her. Through their initiative, the Union Council (lowest tier of the local government) participated in a mediation organised by the Federation.

In this meeting, Bilkis was granted a divorce. This was granted on condition that her *mohorana* (money for the bride according to Muslim Family Law) will be paid by her husband's family. The expenses for her child have also been settled - the total amount of money agreed upon is about 50,000 (equivalent to USD 735) taka. This money will be paid to her in monthly instalments. Her former husband now pays the money to the Federation office every month from where Bilkis receives it.

Local Federations nurtured and trained by RDRS have become significant local actors, engaged in local mediation and in campaigns to tackle injustice suffered by the poor.