



ANNUAL REPORT



THE
SOUTHERN
WOMEN
FEMINIST
NETWORK
(SOWFEN)

WWW.NICEFOUNDATIONBD.ORG

2022-2023

244, KESHOBLAL ROAD
SOUTH PABLA, DAULATPUR
KHULNA, BANGLADESH



Executive Summary:

The **Nice Foundation** facilitated the Southern Women Feminist Network (SoWFeN), formed in 2017, which has realized significant success in its transformative approach to Human Rights and advocacy on community-interested issues. This is a kind of self-financing network and the members collectively move forward with the specific issues and activities for grassroots advocacy and sensitizing the wider community on issues mostly related to Gender Based violence, domestic violence, tobacco control, LGBT issues, Minority women's rights, SRH Rights.



The network members have gained recognition as a human rights organization for its work at the district level. The organizations are actively involved and the members of Standing Committees formed on Women and Child Rights and Protection of the Government of the District (District Legal Aid Committee, District Women and Child Abuse Prevention Committee, Human Trafficking Prevention Committee, District and Upazila Law and Order Protection Committee, Child Marriage Prevention Committee. Also good connections with the Police Station, Superintendent of Police, Chief Judicial Court, Department of Women's Affairs, Women and Child Violence Prevention Committee etc.) are working as members. As a result, the organizations are proud to be recognized by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (for the protection of human rights, interests, and rights of women and children).

SoWFeN's distinct identity lies in its commitment to feminist values, gender-based violence (GBV) advocacy, and the ongoing fight for Hindu Maternal Property Rights. The network, comprising diverse member organizations, actively engages in advocacy initiatives, training programs, and community mobilization to address social injustices.

The Network's dedication to feminist principles is reflected in its continuous efforts to amplify the voices of marginalized women and address gender-based violence. Additionally, SoWFeN has embarked on a significant advocacy journey concerning Hindu Maternal Property Rights. Through local meetings, workshops, and a position paper, the network has engaged with key stakeholders, submitted petitions to authorities, and initiated a letter campaign to raise awareness and seek legal reforms.

This report details the journey, successes, and challenges faced, providing a foundation for ongoing initiatives. The Network looks forward to continued support, replication of successful models, and policy advocacy to create an environment conducive to sustainable development. The Nice Foundation's dedication to social upliftment and community empowerment stands unwavering, ensuring a brighter future for Dalit families.

About the Southern Women Feminist Network (SoWFeN):

SoWFeN, an acronym for the Southern Women Feminist Network, represents a dynamic coalition of Civil Society Organizations united in their commitment to advancing human rights, particularly focusing on issues relevant to women in the southern region. Under the management of the Nice Foundation, SoWFeN stands

as a prominent Human Rights Network dedicated to fostering social change and empowerment. Backed by GFW, USA it was established in 2017 to make a collective movement for attaining the paternal property rights of the Hindu minority women. Gradually it has expanded its geographical area covering more Districts including Rohingya response in the areas of GBV, Protection, and women empowerment.

There are several objectives of forming the network including movement building on the social issues related to the common interest of women and girls as a whole in society. Our focus is on inclusive development for peace-building.

1. To strengthen and enhance the network and capacity of feminist women and human rights defenders for making movements with social issues to bring changes.
2. To promote SRHR, gender equality and prevent any form of violence against women and minorities in the society
3. To bring the voices of girls and women, persons with disabilities, LGBT, and ethnic minorities to the public agenda for change.
4. To advocate for reformation of the existing discriminatory laws and policies to address GBV, paternal property rights, legislative reformation, and other social issues that are interesting for society
5. To undertake activities for improving the safety, and well-being of women, men, girls, boys, transgender and people with disabilities (PWD) in the communities to be protected from gender-based violence.



Primarily it has 15 members including Nice Foundation. Considering the work, presence in the area, community engagement, advocacy skills, connections with different stakeholders, and belief in feminism we finalized for 11 in 9 Districts representing the southwest and East parts of Bangladesh. Comprising a diverse and dedicated group of organizations, SoWFeN's member entities include:

- i. Banchte Shekha (Jashore, Bangladesh)
- ii. Dhruva (Khulna)
- iii. Prerona (Satkhira)
- iv. SHEBA (Bagerhat)
- v. Manabadhikar Sangskrity Foundation (MSF) (Dhaka)
- vi. Welfare Efforts (WE) (Jhenaidah)
- vii. Social Upliftment Voluntary Organization (SUVO) (Barisal)
- viii. Aid Comilla (Cumilla)
- ix. Samaj Kalyan Unnayan Sangstha(SKUS)
- x. Association for Social Development & Distressed Welfare (ASDDW)

As SoWFeN charts its course, the commitment to feminist advocacy, GBV fight, and the pursuit of equitable property rights for Hindu women remains unwavering. The collaborative efforts within the network exemplify

a united front against social injustices, echoing a shared commitment to building a more just and equitable society in the southern region of Bangladesh. The Executive Summary encapsulates the journey, successes, and ongoing challenges, providing a resilient foundation for future feminist and advocacy initiatives.

Introduction:

Nice Foundation has mobilized the network members with its limited resources allocated within the respective areas and districts. Major activities were implemented by the Nice Foundation because of the formation of a model. Several Projects were implemented during the period which are fortifying the Human Rights Defenders Network, envisioning it as a resilient platform for effective advocacy and protection. The project's overarching goals were threefold: first, to engage in comprehensive capacity building by enhancing the skills and knowledge of human rights advocates within the network; second, to amplify advocacy efforts for the protection and promotion of human rights; and third, to foster collaboration and communication within the Human Rights Defenders Network, creating a dynamic and interconnected community of advocates dedicated to the defense of human rights at local, national, and international levels.

Project Activities:

Supporting Hindu minority Women Pig Farming Community

We have been a small initiative with the network with Ubinig- a national NGO on the rights of Hindu minority Women Pig Farming Community as one of the adaptive strategies to climate changes. 30 families from Hindu minority Women Pig Farming Community received 2 pigs each and 100 families received 2 duckling each.

Enhancing the capacity of religious minority community for leadership and public education campaign

Activities:

1. Strengthening the capacity of Minority Hindu community women
2. Conducted monthly meetings with Minority Hindu women groups
3. Organized bi-monthly meeting with Community Young Women Leaders (CYWL)on the monthly plan and progress sharing
4. Arranged training for Community YWL on leadership and capacity-building to work as community women leaders on the social issues
5. Provided orientation on CYWL Action plan development on the mass movement, advocacy, issue-based discussion, day observance and creating village-level CYWL
6. Organized Quarterly meetings with support groups (Human Rights Defenders, Human Rights Commission, Human Rights NGO workers etc.)



7. Conducted Village level courtyard sessions on issue-based advocacy, mass movement, feminism, gender-based violation, and paternal properties rights
8. Observed different days including World Women's Day in collaboration with Local Government
9. Arranged training on human rights, minorities rights, early marriage, dowry, and human trafficking for Hindu minority women
10. Arranged training for raising consciousness on gender, equity, and equality for the Hindu minority community for the promotion of decision-making and equal rights
11. Organised Human rights defenders and built the Coalition
12. Collected and supported/ prepared facts-finding reports on GBV, Early marriage, human trafficking, domestic violation, and conflict on paternal properties access for wider stakeholders
13. Organized sessions with Adolescent girls on Women's Rights/paternal property rights
14. Conducted Advocacy meetings with different stakeholders, submitted Petitions to Government officials, lobby with the policymakers and Mayor, District judge, and arranged press releases.
15. Organized a Divisional level Stakeholders Workshop on the Hindu Minority women's rights, especially on the issues of paternal property rights.



Accomplishments:

1. Conducted 240 monthly meetings with 600 Minority Hindu women
2. Organized 6 meetings in the reporting period with Community Young Women Leaders (CYWL)on the monthly plan and progress sharing
3. Provided 2 days follow-up training to 20 Community YWL leadership and capacity building to work as community women leaders on the social issues
4. Provided 1-day orientation for 20 CYWL on their Action plan development on the mass movement, advocacy, issue-based discussion, day observance and create village-level CYWL
5. Organized Quarterly 4 meetings with 75 support groups (Human Rights Defenders, Human Rights Commission, Human Rights NGO workers etc.)
6. Conducted 240 Village level courtyard sessions on issue-based advocacy, mass movement, feminism, gender-based violation and paternal properties rights
7. Observed 3 different days including World Women's Day and 16 days of activism in collaboration with Local Government
8. Arranged 3 days training for 30 women on human rights, minorities rights, early marriage, dowry and human trafficking for Hindu minority women
9. Arranged 3 days of training for 20 women to raise consciousness on gender, equity, and equality for the Hindu minority community for the promotion of decision-making and equal rights
10. Organized 75 Human rights defenders and built the Coalition and prepared 12 facts-finding reports on GBV, Early marriage, human trafficking, domestic violation, and conflict on paternal property access for wider stakeholders

11. Organized 180 sessions with 200 Adolescents on Women's Rights/paternal property rights
12. Conducted 4 Advocacy meetings with different stakeholders, submitted 1 Petition to Government officials, made several lobby with the policymakers and Mayor, District judge and arranged press releases.
13. Organized a Divisional level Stakeholders Workshop with 40 participants on the Hindu Minority women's rights, especially on the issues of paternal properties rights.
 - Conduct six meetings to facilitate collaboration, information sharing, and coordination among members of the District Human Rights Defenders Network (DHRDN).
 - Organize three training sessions aimed at enhancing the human rights knowledge and facts finding skills of Human Rights Defenders (HRD).
 - Undertake factual investigations into 18 instances of violent incidents to gather accurate information and documentation, aiding in the pursuit of justice and accountability.
 - Host four district-level meetings dedicated to open dialogues and advocacy efforts, engaging key stakeholders to address human rights issues and promote positive change.
 - Organize two day observations dedicated to significant events or themes related to human rights, fostering awareness and advocacy within the community.

Sl.	Name of Activities	Event	Achievement		
			Male	Female	Total
1.	Monthly Women's group meeting on social issues(Early Marriage, Dowry, Violence against women)	240	0	7,160	7,160
2.	Courtyard sessions on social issues, Human Rights, GBV, Mass movement, campaigns, combat early marriage, anti-human trafficking, Tobacco control, case management, and complaint system	240	0	5,902	5,902
3.	Monthly Adolescents Meeting on social issues, SRH Rights, GBV, Mass movement, campaigns, combat early marriage, anti-human trafficking, Tobacco control, case management, and complaint system	240	0	6,965	6,965
4.	Leadership Training for Women Group Leaders	4	0	240	240
5.	Leadership and feminism Training for shadow CYWL	40	0	40	40
6.	Leadership Training for CYWL	4	0	160	160
7.	Bi-monthly meeting of CYWL on movement building	6	0	192	192
8.	Staff Training on Policies, leadership development	1	8	12	20
9.	Staff monthly meeting on the progress of activities	12	120	180	300
10.	Southern Women feminist Network (SoWFeN) meeting	4	10	78	88
11.	Arrange/observe 16 days of Activism (25 November-10 December)	1	83	494	577
12.	Different days observed	28	373	747	1,120

Strengthened the capacity of mass movement on protection, safeguarding, freedom of Choice & Assembly and promoted Human Rights

Activities

1. **Nice Foundation** has strengthened coordination and cooperation and has conducted several meetings with different stakeholders, government officials, social workers and Human rights defenders, and institutes
2. In the reporting period, more than 57 domestic violence, state violence, gender-based violence, dowry, and paternal property rights conflicts cases were supported by the YWL/CYWL by involving village women group leaders
3. Conducted 4 meetings with Khulna Police Superintendent, and Commissioner of Police Bureau of Investigations on the investigation process of cases and expedited the cases without further harassment of victims, especially women-related violence, cases and to reduce state violence
4. Conducted meetings with Khulna District Press Club's new committee including the Chairman and secretary on Hindu women's access to their paternal properties, fair press releases on the human rights violence cases and making it for further movements
5. Updated the human rights violation cases and raised human rights issues especially access to paternal properties by the Hindu women in the monthly Khulna Deputy Commissioners meeting. The DC has appreciated and ensured us his continuous support.



Accomplishments

- **Nice Foundation** has long exposure in the project area and has built strong coordination and cooperation with different stakeholders, especially between YWL, CYWL, organizations, and different Government and non-government stakeholders. This makes the process easy to implement the project activities in a timely fashion.
- Over the period we have had a strong bondage with press, social, and print media which helps us to disseminate the messages, and these groups have played active roles in achieving the project objectives
- It is very important to involve local administration during implementation. We used to submit the progress report every month to the Deputy Commissioner and Upazila Nirbahi Officer Khulna therefore, the local administration is well aware of the project goal and objectives and has been supporting us to go ahead with the causes to resolve.

Enhanced the leadership capacity of Young Women Leaders (CYWL), Shadow YWL, Community Young Women Leaders, shadow CYWL, group women leaders and Adolescent girls & boys for bargaining on the rights and emancipation of women

During the last few years Nice Foundation has created and capacitated 2 Young Women Leaders (YWL), 4 shadow YWL at the organization level, 20 CYWL and 20 shadows CYWL, 60 women leaders and 60 adolescent girls and boys leaders at 2 sub-districts in Khulna who have been working actively on the issues of human rights, minority women's rights, freedom of expression and assembly, mass movements and particularly on the issues of access to the paternal properties by the Hindu minority women. The YWL and Shadow YWL have facilitated 20 CYWL and 20 shadow CYWL for their capacity building. They have organized 600 Hindu women under 20 groups and has created 20 groups with 600 adolescents in 20 villages. The YWL and adolescent leaders are capacitated through training, meeting and mentoring system provided by the YWL and Shadow YWL. They are now in a position to participate in any forum and share the issues with the targeted beneficiaries. They are now confidently motivating the different stakeholders to help the targeted community to achieve their rights.



To develop skill and social interaction, the organization has provided income-generating means, training, regular homestead setting, and food security. Once they become financially solvent, they can take part in the family decision-making process. Besides, they are participating in social and cultural events more than before. All those efforts make them empowered in terms of financial and social. The YWL program is just making the path by converting these activities into leadership quality to some extent. Now they have realized their role and responsibility for society even in the greater aspects.

One of our CYWLs name Ms. Suchanda Rani has been working with Nice Foundation since phase I and received 3 types of training including gender, human rights, and leadership. Initially, she was involved as one of the women's group members and then we enrolled her as a CYWL. She has participated in our many workshops, mass movements, press releases, rallies and human chains, monthly Human Rights Defenders meetings, and quarterly HRD network advocacy events. Through the whole process, she becomes very confident and attains knowledge of paternal property rights issues. She decided that until and unless I start the movement from my family society will not listen to her and will not support her on the issue. She started struggling with her parents and brother but she never got a positive response. She discussed it in her monthly meeting with other 30 women and asking help from other CYWLs in her area. One day 40 woman went to her house and asked her father to rethink the proportionate access to the paternal properties. Her father

initially wanted to know about the culture and the patriarchal laws. Suchanda's father is a simple man and was convinced after a long discussion. He committed that if any instances can be cited in this sub-district that I will do. Suchand's father, mother, and brother were convinced after a certain time and now they are happy whenever our CYWL conducts sessions they raise this case as one of success.

Strengthened Human Rights Defenders Network to work for peace and justice in the society

In phase (i) we have created Human Rights Defenders Network with 75 activists. The YWL has initiated many activities with the community at the village level, local elected bodies, local administration, political leaders, lawyers, journalists, Members of Parliaments, District Judges, and Whip and has intensively visited the villages where the minority communities are living. This has created a solid base but we realized that this is not enough to move way forward. Moreover, our organized 20 women groups and 20 adolescent groups from 20 villages in two sub-districts where 1200 women and adolescents are actively involved in the social movement has given us strong backup to attain the purpose. The community women are sensitized in a way that now they are interested and ready to be involved in the whole process of a social movement to achieve the rights issues. We have conducted quarterly meetings and discussions with National level Human Rights activists, NGOs, Civil Society members, and Lawyers to strengthen the network. We have 2 online meetings and 8 physical meetings during the period on harmonizing and making a move for the rights causes. The HRDN and coalition is a strong body that makes movement against any violation of Human Rights and raises those to national and International forums. This is one of the great achievements of Nice Foundation which was possible only by facilitating the mentorship process supported by the Global Fund for Women.

Day Observation

The Nice Foundation fervently observed the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, spanning from November 25th to December 10th, with a diverse array of activities aimed at raising awareness and advocating for human rights. Engaging discussions and rallies were organized, bringing communities together to address issues surrounding gender-based violence. Special gatherings celebrated the contribution of Human Rights Defenders, recognizing their dedication to the cause. Discussion meetings and courtyard gatherings facilitated open dialogue on human rights, fostering a culture of shared understanding and empowerment.

In line with our commitment to holistic well-being, health services were extended to the community, with a particular focus on pregnant women. Economic empowerment initiatives for women were launched, fostering financial independence and resilience. A comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health campaign furthered our commitment to promoting informed choices and reproductive rights. The



commemoration extended to Begum Rokeya Day, where the Foundation honored the visionary leader's contributions to women's empowerment and education. The International Human Rights Day was marked

with renewed vigor, emphasizing the universality of human rights principles and the importance of collective action.

A dedicated effort was made to address the critical issue of child marriage. Through community engagement and awareness campaigns, the Foundation worked towards preventing child marriages, emphasizing the importance of education and safeguarding the rights of the young.

In conclusion, these observation days were a testament to the Foundation's unwavering dedication to human rights. The multifaceted activities not only raised awareness but also actively contributed to empowering communities, fostering dialogue, and advocating for a society built on principles of equality and justice. The Nice Foundation remains committed to advancing human rights and creating positive, sustainable change within the communities it serves.

Strengthening Human Rights Defenders Network

The project has yielded significant outcomes and impacts, contributing to the strengthening of the Human Rights Defenders Network. Successfully strengthened the Human Rights Defenders Network: The network now stands as a robust platform, providing a unified voice for human rights advocacy and fostering a supportive environment for defenders. Conducted Training Sessions, Workshops, and Awareness Campaigns: By organizing 10 training sessions, 5 workshops, and 20 awareness campaigns, the project has empowered and mobilized human rights advocates with enhanced skills, strategic advocacy approaches, and increased public awareness.



Challenges Faced and Strategies:

Access: Resources are limited, and voluntary works are crucial therefore, strong motivation was needed to implement the targeted activities.

Stakeholders Timing: Getting time to meet with the policymakers, high-level stakeholders and Government Officials is very much a blessing. However, Initial reluctance is overcome through awareness campaigns and engaging another community leader.

Policy Advocacy: Engaging in policy advocacy is a strategic avenue to create an enabling environment for projects similar to ours. By actively participating in dialogues with policymakers, governmental bodies, and relevant stakeholders, we seek to influence policies that support sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. Our advocacy efforts will draw attention to the positive outcomes achieved and the potential for scalable, replicable models to drive impactful policy change. In the past several issues have been made through lobbying and advocacy with different levels of decision-makers.

Local Government/Divisional Commissioner:

To adequately address the needs of survivors and preventive measures we mobilized the community to demand an increase in budget allocation for addressing early marriage and gender-based violence. We have organized mass movements, signature campaigns, mass petitions, and workshops with local government on minority women's paternal property rights.

State Ministries:

To influence policymaking at the state level and ensure a holistic approach to tackling gender-based violence we lobby with state Ministers, a Whip, and a Woman Parliamentarian (who is also the ED of a National NGO) on the Hindu minority women's paternal property rights. We have scope to lobby for the inclusion of comprehensive gender-based violence prevention strategies in state-level policies.

National Ministries:

We have a strong understanding and collaboration with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs at the national level as we have been implementing bilateral projects with this Ministry. We raised the issue including implementation and allocating budget for the "National Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy" for legal reforms addressing gender-based violence. We work with national authorities to enact and enforce laws that protect individuals from gender-based violence.

Secretariats/Submission of Petition to PM Office:

During the last couple of years, we have jointly submitted a petition to the Prime Minister's Office on the reformation of laws on Hindu Minority Women's access to paternal properties. We also ensure that administrative processes are designed to address gender-based violence concerns effectively. Engagement with the Secretariat to integrate gender-sensitive measures in administrative procedures.



Media and Religious Leaders:

To make advocacy media has been playing a vital role. We have conducted many workshops, meeting, Press releases, and press conferences with divisional and district-level journalists and press clubs on the issues. Other than this we also arranged dialogue sessions and awareness campaigns with community and religious leaders to change societal norms and attitudes by gaining the support and advocacy of influential community and religious figures.

The SoWFeN Network places a paramount emphasis on the sustainability of our initiatives, recognizing that the enduring impact on communities goes beyond immediate outcomes. Our commitment to sustainability is articulated through strategic measures:

Capacity Development: Ongoing training programs constitute a cornerstone of our sustainability efforts. By providing continuous skill and capacity development opportunities, empower community members with the knowledge and expertise needed to thrive independently. These programs foster a culture of continuous learning, ensuring that the acquired skills remain relevant and adaptive to evolving agricultural practices, ultimately contributing to the long-term success of the communities we serve.

Community Empowerment: True sustainability emerges when communities particularly women-headed families are equipped with the leadership and institutional capacity to chart their course. Our commitment extends to the empowerment of local leadership and community institutions, fostering self-reliance and resilience. By strengthening these foundations, we empower communities to not only navigate current challenges but also to proactively address future opportunities and obstacles. This multifaceted approach ensures that the positive impacts of our interventions are woven into the fabric of community life, fostering lasting change and self-determined progress.

Recommendations

The success of the SoWFeN Network's lays the groundwork for continued impact and sustainable development. As we reflect on our achievements, several key recommendations and future directions emerge:

Continued Support: Advocating for continued support from donors and stakeholders is imperative for the longevity and effectiveness of our initiatives. We recognize the invaluable contributions of our supporters in making a positive impact on the lives of Dalit communities. We will engage in proactive communication, emphasizing the outcomes and significance of our projects to secure ongoing support and financial backing.



Replication and Scaling up: The successful aspects of the current project offer a blueprint for replication in other communities facing similar challenges. We envision exploring opportunities to scale our initiatives and replicate successful models, extending the benefits of our interventions to a wider demographic. By identifying and collaborating with communities that share analogous socio-economic contexts, we aim to maximize our positive influence and contribute to broader societal transformations.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Strengthening the monitoring and evaluation framework is paramount to ensuring the continual improvement of our projects. Regular assessments of activities, outcomes, and community impact will be conducted, allowing for data-driven decision-making. This commitment to rigorous monitoring and evaluation reflects our dedication to transparency, accountability, and the delivery of high-impact interventions that align with the evolving needs of the communities we serve.

Conclusion:

The collaborative efforts between the SoWFeN Network and the Nice Foundation have undeniably led to transformative changes within Dalit communities, particularly the Kawra community, emphasizing Human Rights, feminist values, and gender-based violence (GBV) advocacy. The success of initiatives like pig farming, sustainable agriculture, and community engagement attests to the tangible positive impacts experienced by the Kawra community. The dedication to feminist principles, as exemplified in the Southern Women Feminist Network, is a driving force behind the ongoing fight for Hindu Maternal Property Rights and the commitment to addressing issues such as GBV, domestic violence, and minority women's rights. By

fostering leadership, building strong networks, and engaging in continuous advocacy, the SoWFeN Network has not only empowered communities but has also laid the foundation for sustainable and lasting change. As the journey continues, the focus on capacity development, community empowerment, and replication of successful models positions the SoWFeN Network and the Nice Foundation as beacons of hope for social justice and equality.

The commitment to feminist advocacy and the GBV fight is further reinforced by the proactive engagement in policy advocacy, capacity building, and the creation of the Human Rights Defenders Network. The network's dedication to amplifying the voices of marginalized women and its noteworthy advocacy journey on Hindu Maternal Property Rights showcase a multifaceted approach to addressing social injustices. The involvement of diverse member organizations and the collaborative efforts in community mobilization demonstrate a united front against GBV and a shared commitment to building a more just and equitable society. The Nice Foundation and network's initiatives, ranging from leadership training to the observation of significant days like the 16 Days of Activism, reflect a holistic approach to empowerment and social change. As the SoWFeN Network charts its course, the emphasis on sustainability through continuous support, replication of successful models, and robust monitoring and evaluation underscores a vision for enduring impact and positive societal transformation.