

Women and the Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh

Executive Summary



THE
CARTER CENTER



মানুষের জন্য
manusher jonno

THE CARTER CENTER'S Global Access to Information Program

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MAKING ALL
VOICES COUNT

A GRAND CHALLENGE
FOR DEVELOPMENT



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INTRODUCTION

For over 15 years, the Carter Center's Global Access to Information Program has served as a leader in advancing the passage, implementation, and enforcement of access to information regimes in the Americas, Africa, and China, and in raising the international profile of the value of the right to information. Through this work, we have identified a potential inequity facing women in the exercise of the right to information.

Though recent years have witnessed a plethora of research and programming related to voice, participation, and empowerment of women, access to information has been implied rather than explicitly identified as a core ingredient for success. Importantly, when focus is placed on a woman's ability to fully and effectively exercise her fundamental right to information, the considerable gender asymmetries become apparent. Continuing failure to engage in gender-sensitive policy making; entrenched traditional cultural mores; lack of engagement from women's civil society organizations; information access and flows that exclude women; and long-standing obstacles such as illiteracy, overwhelming household responsibilities, and immobility all have played a role in creating gender asymmetries in the exercise of the right to information.

To demonstrate the hypothesis that women are not able to access information with the same facility (frequency, ease, and rate of success) as men, The Carter Center developed a quantitative and qualitative study. The Bangladesh study, conducted by Manusher Jonno Foundation, not only assessed whether women are able to exercise the right to information with the same facility as men but also identified the main obstacles facing women in accessing information, and types of information most critical to women for economic empowerment and the protection of rights. With the study findings, The Carter Center, along with partners Manusher Jonno Foundation, the Bangladesh Information Commission, key government agencies, and civil society organizations will seek to apply solutions to help women overcome obstacles and more fully and meaningfully exercise the fundamental right of access to information.

What Is Access to Information?

Access to information, also called the right to information and freedom of information, is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights and currently enjoyed by over 4 billion people in more than 100 countries around the world. Access to information allows the general public to seek and receive information held by governments—and often private entities—that perform public duties or receive public funds. It is an important right that serves both governments and their citizens. For governments, an access to information regime helps increase citizen confidence as decision making becomes more transparent, assists public administration to become more efficient and effective as recordkeeping systems are organized and procedures are established, allows scarce resources to be properly applied and utilized, and can serve to increase foreign investment. Access to information also enables citizens to engage more meaningfully in public life; understand policies and help determine public priorities; and use the information to ensure the exercise of other human rights, including the rights to clean water, a safe environment, education, and health services. It is a tool that provides the power to ensure that social services reach the most disadvantaged and marginalized people, supports true social accountability, and promotes political and economic empowerment and the protection of individual rights.

What Significance Does It Hold for Women?

Often in our societies it is the most vulnerable and marginalized populations who suffer the greatest due to limited access of information and this is particularly true for women. In many countries, one-half of the population may be limited in their full enjoyment of the right to information and the myriad benefits that it provides. Around the world, women frequently suffer from higher rates of poverty and lower rates of education and are more susceptible to the adverse effects of corruption. All of these issues can be addressed by providing women with access to meaningful information.

Women frequently face the double burden of generating income and caring for their families. A disproportionate number of people living below the poverty line (living on roughly \$1 USD a day or less) are women. Economic opportunities for women remain more limited than men. In Southeast Asia, for example, the agricultural sector represents an important employment opportunity for women: in Bangladesh, 64 percent of employed women work in the agricultural sector. However, women make anywhere from four percent to 21 percent less than their male counterparts,



Women drying paddy for husking at Sherpur.
Photo: Golam Rahman

depending on location. Despite great progress in increasing enrollment of girls in primary education over the past decades, primary education is not yet universal. For girls/women in post-primary education, there remains an even greater disparity, particularly for households with declining income. Not all education for girls/women is of the same quality as the education received by boys/men. Without a free flow of information that effectively reaches women, other fundamental rights, such as the right to health, property and freedom from violence may not be fully enjoyed by all. Genuine access to information is a powerful tool that can enable women to take advantage of opportunities to transform their lives, families, and communities.

In sum, access to information:

- ◆ Allows women to make more effective decisions, for example, with relation to education, crop production, land ownership, and health care
- ◆ Enables women to know and exercise their full range of rights
- ◆ Helps women to participate more fully in public life
- ◆ Is critical for holding government and service providers accountable and for reducing corruption

- ◆ Bridges gender gaps and helps to shift power
- ◆ Provides opportunities for women’s economic empowerment

The Right to Information in Bangladesh

A popular demand for a right of access to information did not gain traction in Bangladesh until the 1980s, when journalists began to fight against restrictions on press freedom. Momentum toward establishing right to information legislation was slowed and not revisited again until 2002, when the Law Commission first presented a working paper on the right to information in Bangladesh. In 2006, Manusher Jonno Foundation, a leading human rights organization in Bangladesh, circulated a second draft right to information bill. Following continued political conflict, a military-backed caretaker government came into power and in 2008, issued a right to information ordinance. In 2008, the Information Ministry collaborated with civil society on a draft of the Right to Information Act based on the existing ordinance and with minor amendments it was passed into law. The Right to Information Act went into effect in Bangladesh on July 1, 2009.¹

ACCESS TO INFORMATION ENABLES WOMEN TO KNOW AND EXERCISE THEIR FULL RANGE OF RIGHTS.



Women gather after a training.
Photo: Shahnaz Karim

Under the 2009 Right to Information Act, all citizens have the right to information from any public authority, and that authority is bound to provide citizens with the requested information unless it falls within one of several categories of privileged information, often related to matters of national security and intelligence. The law applies to all branches of the government—legislative, executive, and judicial. It further requires that all authorities publish and preserve all information relevant to citizens with certain exceptions; and importantly, it creates and tasks an Information Commission to carry out its implementation and enforcement.

In exercising the right of access to information under the act, citizens do not need to provide the agency with a reason for their request but must provide personal information and any related information that may help the agency find the requested forms or documents. Requests must be made in writing, which can be done electronically or through e-mail. All public authorities are required to appoint a designated information officer to answer requests as well as to oversee that the authority is properly preserving/computerizing information and following the guidelines and directives of the Information Commission. Though the Right to Information Act in Bangladesh went into effect in 2009, its implementation has been slow, and there is little evidence that it is reach-

ing the full population.² While the government's pledge to advance the right of access to information is clear, there still remains a gap between commitment and full realization.

IN EXERCISING THE RIGHT OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION UNDER THE ACT, CITIZENS DO NOT NEED TO PROVIDE THE AGENCY WITH A REASON FOR THEIR REQUEST.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The Carter Center and local partner Manusher Jonno Foundation conducted an innovative research study to identify whether gender inequities exist in the exercise of the right of access to information, and if so, the main cultural, structural, and legal barriers that women face in accessing public information, as well as women’s priority information. The study is designed to test the hypothesis that women are unable to exercise the fundamental right of access to information with the same facility (frequency, ease, and rate of success) as men and to identify the specific obstacles that women face and the particular information women most need in order to achieve greater economic empowerment and the promotion and protection of rights.

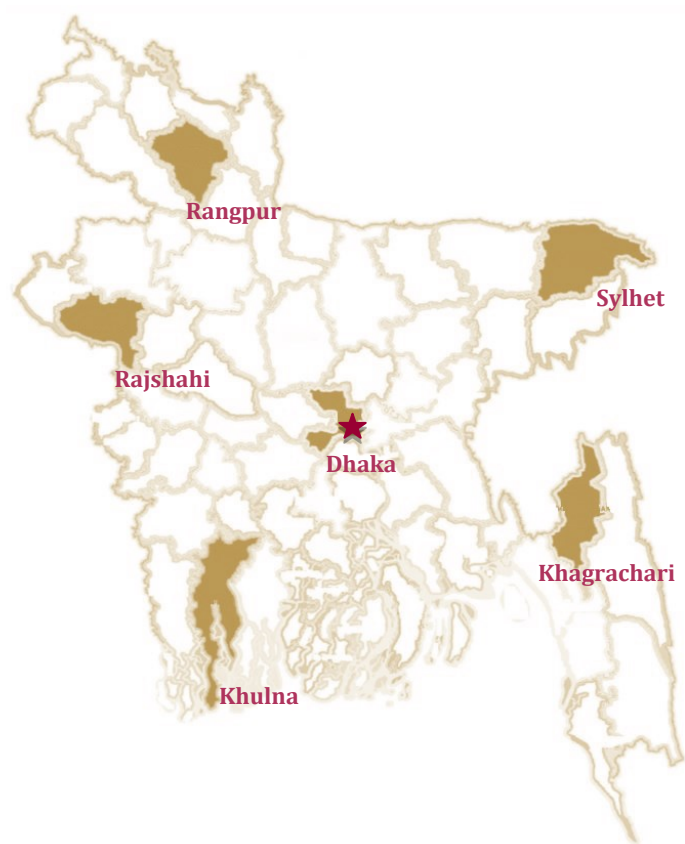
The research design utilizes multiple methods of data collection and sources, relying on both existing secondary data and the collection of primary data through interviews with heads of civil society organizations and other community leaders, expert opinion interviews, and non-participant observation of access to information practices in relevant government ministries and agencies. Each agency was visited three times on different days and at different times of the day to account for any potential variances. In addition to the observation, researchers interviewed public servants and “customers” who entered the public offices for information. Importantly, the findings reflect the perceptions of those interviewed and illustrate trends but without statistical sampling may not be fully representative. The study has been employed in Liberia, Guatemala, and now Bangladesh.

Following the initial data gathering, local stakeholders had an opportunity to review, comment, and discuss the findings in “validation meetings” hosted in the districts surveyed. These validation meetings provided a further opportunity for the community to reflect on whether the findings are consistent with their own realities as well as to gather additional qualitative information from the discussion and comments. As part of the study methodology, and following the final analysis of the data, the initial release of the findings occurred at a multistakeholder meeting, providing the opportunity to discuss the data and findings, jointly consider the problems, and develop potential solutions/recommendations for assuring greater equity in the exercise of the right to information.

Focus Areas

Economic empowerment for women is a critical issue around the world. To target the study and make it more understandable/ and meaningful for interview participants, much of the focus of the study is related to economic empowerment themes, such as education and land. However, we are aware that in certain contexts, other issues—such as violence against women, health, or access to justice—are of equal or overriding importance. As such, the research is designed to allow for other critical areas to emerge, particularly related to the promotion and protection of other fundamental human rights. Within the area of access to information for economic empowerment, we engaged four interconnected themes: education, land, business, and agriculture. Also, we explored women’s need for information on rights more generally.

Example of Focus Areas for Economic Empowerment and Promotion and Protection of Rights	
Education	Can women access information about educational policies and school budgets?
	Can women access information about study plans, personnel, materials, programs, including vocational?
	Can women access information about scholarships and educational opportunities?
Property Rights	Can women access information related to policies regarding land ownership?
	Can women access information related to rights of possessing or inheriting land?
	Can women access titles to property?
Business	Can women access information about government procedures related to starting a small business?
	Can women access policies and procedures for business licensing?
	Can women access the policies and procedures related to government-funded loans?
	Can women access information relevant to commercial/ market interests such as: the number of similar businesses that exist, taxes, importation costs, etc.?
Agriculture	Can women access information about pricing of goods?
	Can women access information about government-sponsored programs for seeds and fertilizers?
	Can women access information about water policies?
Rights	Can women obtain information about advancing their rights, for example labor rights, the right to live free from violence, health, and sexual and reproductive rights?
	Can women access information about appealing to an authority in case their rights are violated?
	Can women access information/data/statistics about how/when/where there have been rights violations?



Selection of Districts

The study methodology called for regional sample diversity. By collecting full data sets within each region, a case study for each district and Dhaka was completed to identify variations in women's access to information, key obstacles, and priority issues. This allowed a comparison of areas to see whether there are unique factors affecting women's access to information. These regional findings were then aggregated to provide insights into the status of women and the right of access to information at the national level, identifying perceptions and trends across Bangladesh to the extent possible based on the limited sample size.

Moreover, in selecting the sample districts, we sought to promote inclusion of different geographic areas and religious, indigenous, and cultural groups that make up the overall population of Bangladesh. Criteria for determining the counties included regional diversity, rural versus urban, existence of traditional societies, and other factors. Based on consultations with Manusher Jonno Foundation, the Information Commission, and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Khagrachari, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Sylhet were selected as the sample districts, in addition to metropolitan Dhaka. In each of the districts, interviews were conducted in the Sadar Upazila and one or two more rural Upazilas. In addition to the five districts, the district of Dhaka was

included in the study, as it is the most populous and urban district in Bangladesh. Moreover, all primary ministry and agency buildings are located within Dhaka. While most agencies have suboffices in each of the 64 districts, each agency is headquartered in the capital city.

Research Questions

The following research questions served as the basis of the study:

1. Are women able to access information with the same facility (frequency, ease, and rate of success) as men?
2. What are the main obstacles facing women in the exercise of the right to information?
3. What information is most important to women for increasing economic empowerment and promoting/protecting rights?

Data Collection

Manusher Jonno Foundation, with assistance from the Carter Center's Global Access to Information Program, was primarily responsible for identifying and supporting local researchers, ensuring data collection according to the research methodology, and organizing validation activities to complete the study. A team of local researchers were trained to employ the research methodology in their communities. Each district team was made up of two or three researchers responsible for conducting interviews and field observations, as well as transcribing data for analysis, with a supervisor to assist and check data. Researchers collected three types of data: interviews with community leaders, expert opinion interviews, and non-participant observations with complementary interviews. The field researchers were provided forms to fill in to record the responses of the interviewees as well as to collect observational data. These forms enabled data to be collected more systematically and uniformly across districts. The interview schedule was reviewed by the in-country research team prior to commencing the interviews. After the forms were collected, data was translated and digitized. It was then manually input into electronic spreadsheet files for analysis.



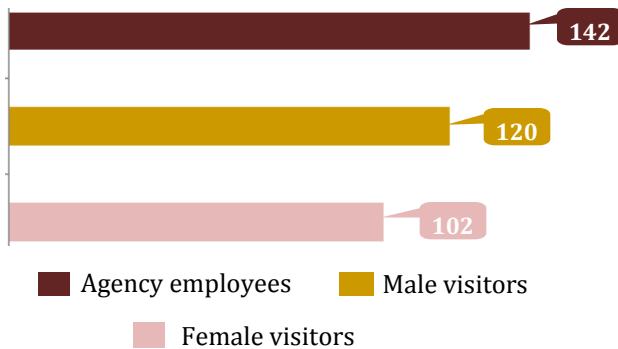
Gender Breakdown Community Leaders



Experts



Nonparticipant Observation



Analysis

Collecting multiple types of data allowed for triangulation during analysis. The Carter Center team worked closely with in-country researchers to analyze and validate the findings. Outcomes from each source were compared against the other two sources—as well as to secondary data collected—to test reliability of the findings and increase confidence that these findings accurately represent perceptions and sentiment regarding women and access to information. The Carter Center began the analysis process by identifying emergent themes through a grounded-theory approach. Quantitative and qualitative data were included from all three data sets to derive preliminary findings for each district and Dhaka.

Following preliminary analysis, the research team under the guidance of Manusher Jonno Foundation held focus groups in each district to validate the initial findings. This process allowed researchers, participants, and community stakeholders to discuss limitations of the study and follow-up questions, thereby further contextualizing the findings.

Once the validations were complete, all data sets were reviewed through a quality assurance process to ensure validity and reliability for final analysis. Data sources were then analyzed for existing and reoccurring patterns. Analysts utilized an emic focus in reviewing qualitative content, maintaining the respondent's point of view as much as possible through direct transcription sensitive to local language and meaning and by examining context provided by researcher observations.

COLLECTING MULTIPLE TYPES OF DATA ALLOWED FOR TRIANGULATION DURING ANALYSIS.

AGGREGATE FINDINGS

Overview of Data Sources

The following represents an overview of the data sources employed in the study.

COMMUNITY LEADERS

- ◆ 128 community leaders were interviewed
- ◆ Community leaders self-identified as working on a number of issues, including:
 - Education
 - Farming/Agriculture
 - Human rights
 - Land
 - Local participation/Community engagement
 - Reproductive rights
 - Sexual and gender-based violence
 - Starting businesses
- ◆ 90 percent of community leaders serve both men and women, eight percent reported that their organizations serve women, one percent serve men, and one percent gave no response

EXPERTS

- ◆ 81 experts were interviewed
- ◆ Experts came from a variety of backgrounds, including:
 - 12 percent were academic affiliates or university professors
 - 15 percent represented a nongovernmental organization or the international community
 - 56 percent were local or higher-level government officials³
 - 17 percent were classified as other” (businessmen, journalists, etc.)
- ◆ Areas of expertise included:
 - Education
 - Farming/Agriculture
 - Human rights
 - Land
 - Local participation/Community engagement
 - Reproductive rights
 - Sexual and gender-based violence
 - Starting a business

NONPARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

There were 49 total agencies in which nonparticipant observation was conducted. The following agencies were

nonparticipant observation sites in at least one district during the study, and each was visited three times on different days in order to provide a more complete and accurate picture:

Agriculture Office
Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training
City Corporation South: Social Welfare/Slum Development
City Corporation North: Holding Number
City Corporation North: Trade License
Education Office
Family Planning Office
Health Office
Information Office
Land Office
Livestock Office
Local Government Engineering Department
Office of Chief Revenue Officer
Rural Development and Cooperatives Office
Small and Cottage Industries Corporation
Social Welfare Office
Youth Development Office

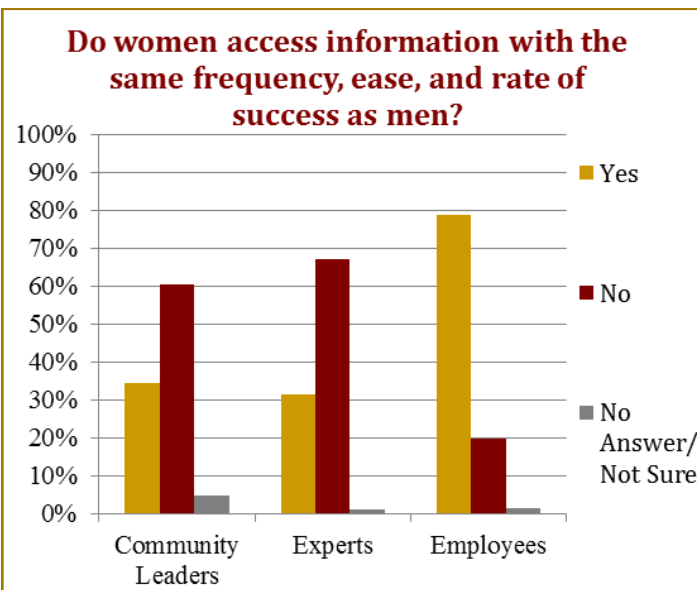
In total, 71.5 percent of agency employees observed during the study were male, while only 28.5 percent were female.



Photo: Manusher Jonno Foundation

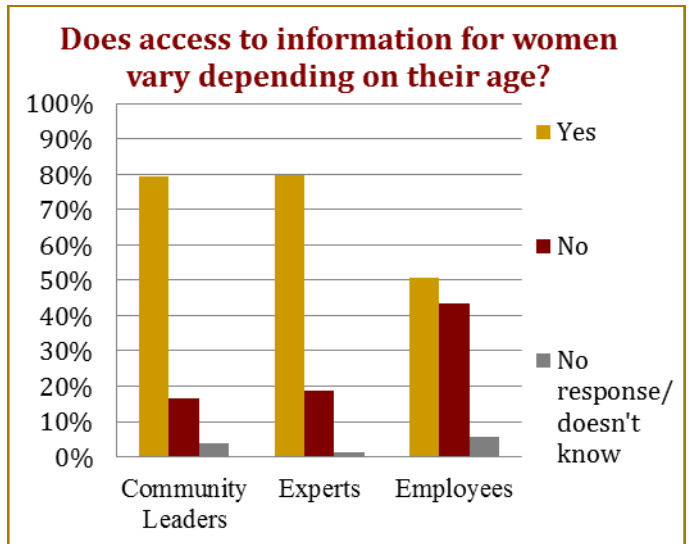
Inequities in Access to Information

All three respondent groups within the sample were asked whether women access information with the same facility (frequency, ease, and rate of success) as men. The aggregate findings from community leaders and expert interviews indicate the perception that women **do not** access information as easily or as frequently as do men. Though the percentages varied by district, government or public agency employees largely believed that women **do** access information with the same level of frequency, ease, and success as men.



When asked to recall an experience in which they had attempted to access government-held information, 70 percent of community leaders said that the information they had attempted to access was ultimately received. Eleven percent said the information was never received, while nine percent said they did not know, and 10 percent did not provide a response. Though the majority of those surveyed indicated they did eventually receive information, there was a distinct discrepancy between information received for the community leaders themselves compared to information received by other individuals whom they were assisting. This may be attributed to their perceived status or recognition within the local community.

During the validation exercises, this distinction was highlighted. Validation participants emphasized that women leaders, those representing organizations or communities and those with perceived higher status, were more successful in exercising the right to information than women who do not benefit from this profile.



During the validation meetings, participants noted that marital status—as well as age—also plays a role in women’s facility to exercise the right to information, as married women have more responsibilities and potentially more restrictions. Moreover, it was expressed that education may be a contributing factor, with younger women being more educated and thus, theoretically, more successful in the exercise of the right to information. Additionally it was identified that younger women are perceived as more “progressive” and more likely to seek information related to increased economic empowerment. Experts noted that younger women tend to seek information related to training and personal development opportunities while elderly women tend to seek information regarding benefits and other social services more often.

THE AGGREGATE FINDINGS INDICATE THE PERCEPTION THAT WOMEN DO NOT ACCESS INFORMATION AS EASILY OR AS FREQUENTLY AS MEN.

Barriers to Women’s Access to Information

When asked to rank the top barriers facing women in the exercise of their right to information, community leaders across all six districts most frequently identified the following:

1. Illiteracy
2. Lack of awareness/where to go/how to ask for information
3. Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy

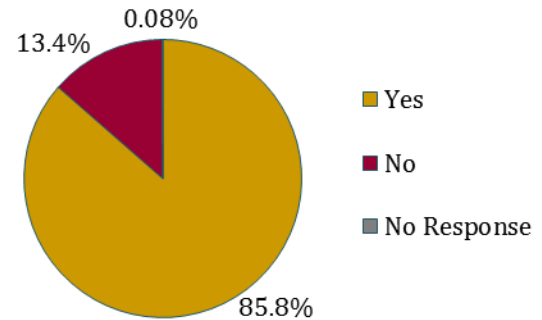
Other obstacles often cited included issues related to time and mobility. It was noted that household demands and distance of the office as well as safety in travel serve as important impediments to women seeking public information. Moreover, there was the perception that others (including public officials) may not see information as important to or for women.

Experts also were asked to rank the top barriers facing women in the exercise of their right to information, and the aggregate of the six districts found that the most frequently identified barriers were:

1. Lack of awareness/where to go/how to ask for information
2. Illiteracy
3. Someone in family not supportive/impedes women/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy

While some people interviewed noted that women are not interested in information, when asked specifically, more than 85 percent of community leaders perceived that women are in fact interested in public information. For the expert data set, 81 percent said that women are interested in accessing government held information, thus belying one of the commonly held myths.

Do you think women are interested in accessing information held by the government? Community Leaders (n=128)



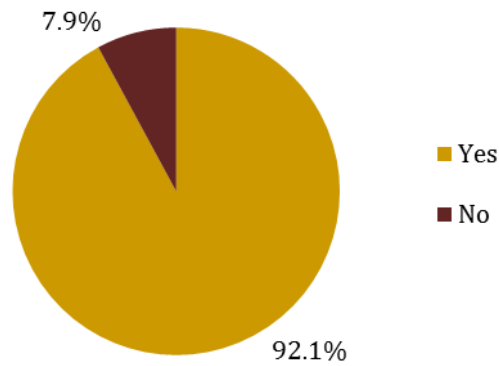
Priority Information for Women’s Economic Empowerment and Promotion and Protection of Rights

In considering information most relevant for women’s economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights, researchers first asked community leaders whether they felt that the government held important information for women. Approximately 90 percent of all respondents affirmed that the government does possess critical information, serving as a powerful rebut to the notion that women do not need information.

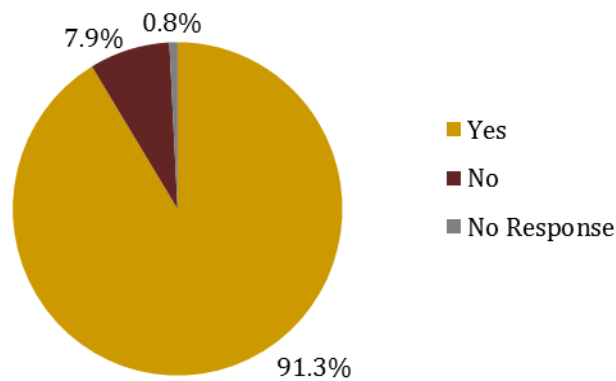
When asked what information is the **most** valuable for women’s increased economic empowerment and the promotion and protection of rights, based on the weighted values community leaders said information related to education three times more than the next most important, land/property.

MORE THAN 85 PERCENT OF COMMUNITY LEADERS PERCEIVED THAT WOMEN ARE, IN FACT, INTERESTED IN PUBLIC INFORMATION.

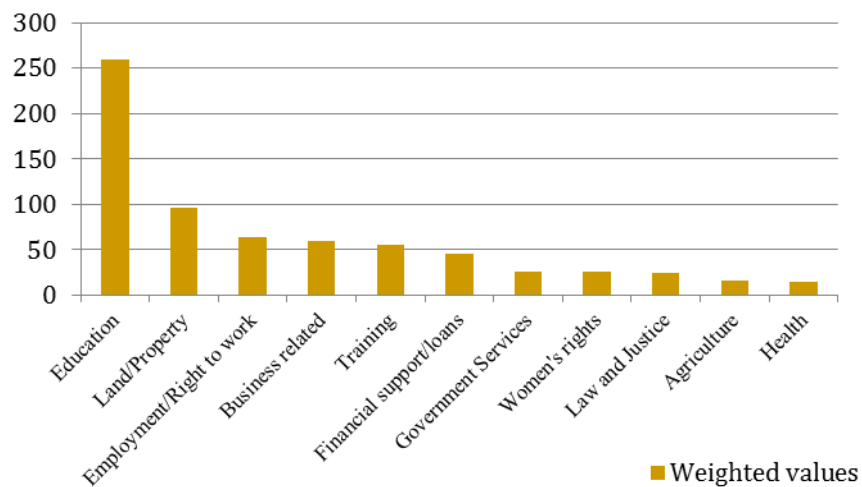
**Do you think that the national government holds information women need to better their lives?
Community Leaders (n=128)**



**Do you think that the local government holds information women need to better their lives?
Community Leaders (n=128)**



**What information would be most valuable to women for economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights?
Community Leaders (n=128)**



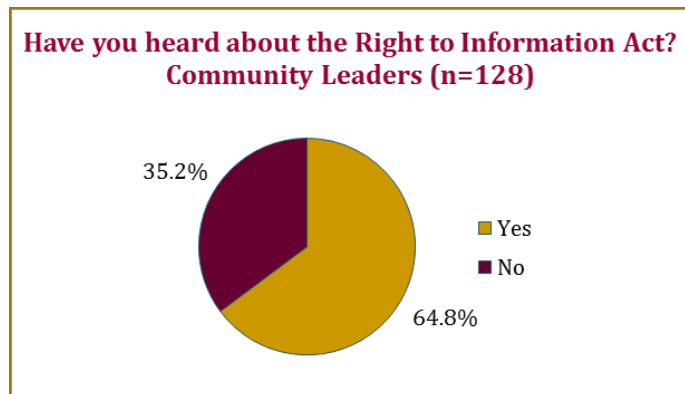
Awareness of Rights

Community leaders were asked to comment on women’s awareness of their socio-economic and human rights. According to their responses, in none of the categories did the community leaders identify women as **very** or **not at all** aware of their rights.

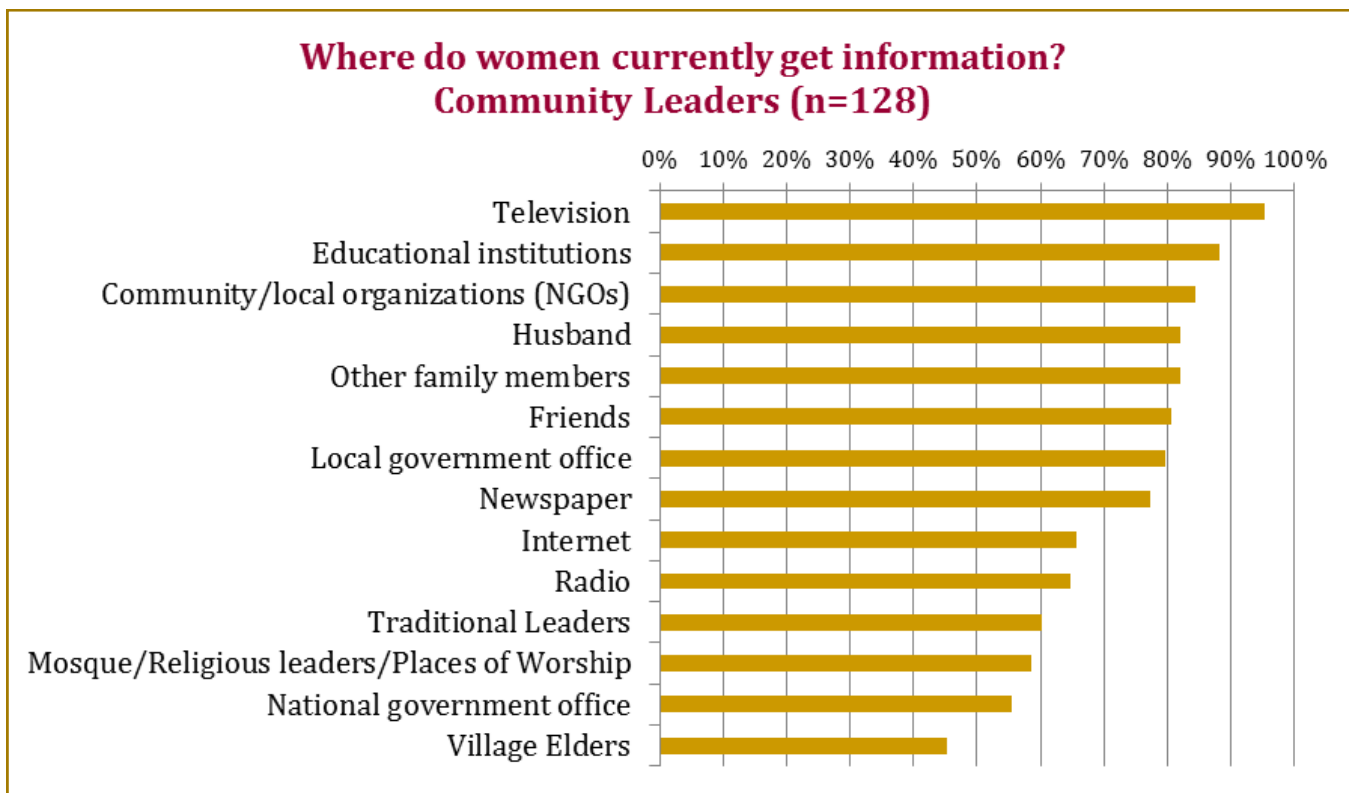
Community leaders indicated that women are **somewhat aware** of their rights across all of the following categories:

- ◆ Right to be free from violence—domestic, violence against women, etc. (77 percent)
- ◆ Right to be treated equally with all others—free from discrimination (75 percent)
- ◆ Right to work, under good working conditions/ reasonable working hours (72 percent)
- ◆ Right to information (68 percent)
- ◆ Right to be able to join groups/association (63 percent)
- ◆ Right to own property (59 percent)
- ◆ Right to education, including beyond the classroom (57 percent)
- ◆ Right to be able to go to court if any rights are violated (52 percent)

When community leaders were asked about their own awareness of the right to information, 65 percent responded affirmatively, while 35 percent were themselves not aware.



When asked where women currently get their information, community leaders most often noted: television (95 percent); educational institutions (88 percent); and community/local organizations (NGOs) (84 percent), amongst other sources.



DHAKA DISTRICT

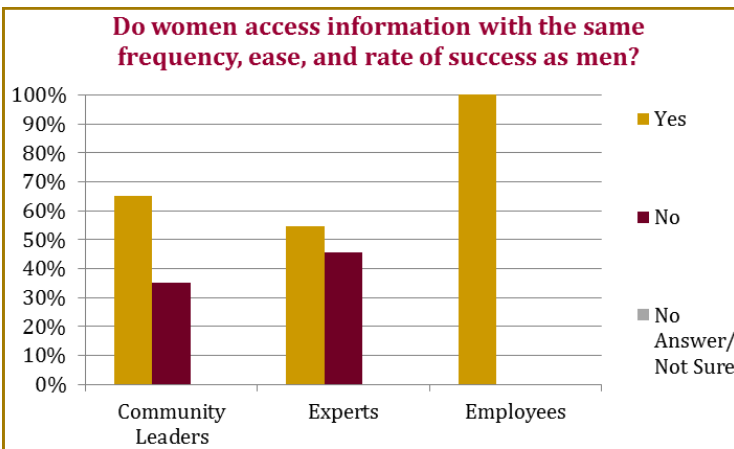
In Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, 20 community leaders and 11 experts were interviewed. A total of nine government agencies were visited, and interviews were conducted with 27 civil servants (6 women, 21 men) and 54 visitors to the agencies. Unlike the other districts, community leaders (65 percent) and experts (55 percent) in Dhaka said they believe that women **do** access information at the same rate as men. Additionally, agency employees (100 percent) in Dhaka overwhelmingly agreed that women and men **do** access information at the same rate. Notably, when disaggregating the community leader and experts responses by gender of the person interviewed, slightly more women community leaders feel that there is an inequity. For experts, there is a marked difference, with 75 percent of the men saying that women receive access to information with the same facility and only 25 percent of the female experts agreeing.

Community leaders in Dhaka identified illiteracy, difficulty in accessing public offices because of domestic duties/mobility, and someone in family not supportive/culturally not appropriate/paternalism as the three

greatest barriers. The lack of mobility and safety in movement noted by community leaders is interesting, as the issue in Dhaka appears to be more related to fear and insecurity than availability of transport. Experts largely agreed with these obstacles, although they placed lack of awareness of the right and how to request information as the second greatest barrier to access for women. Validation participants largely agreed with the barriers, though also spoke of the importance of civil servants' mindset and negative attitude toward women requesters.

Both community leaders (85 percent) and experts (73 percent) overwhelmingly responded that access to information for women varies depending on their age. In contrast, agency employees (78 percent) in Dhaka responded that age did not impact access to information.

When asked about the most valuable kinds of information for women to achieve greater economic empowerment and rights, community leaders identified education, land/property, and business related/trade license/starting a business.



Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information: Community Leaders



1. Illiteracy
2. Getting to public offices (mobility/distance/safety/domestic duties)
3. Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy

Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information: Experts



1. Illiteracy
2. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask
3. Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy

What information would be most valuable to women for economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights?

1. Education
2. Land/Property
3. Business related/Trade

KHAGRACHARI DISTRICT

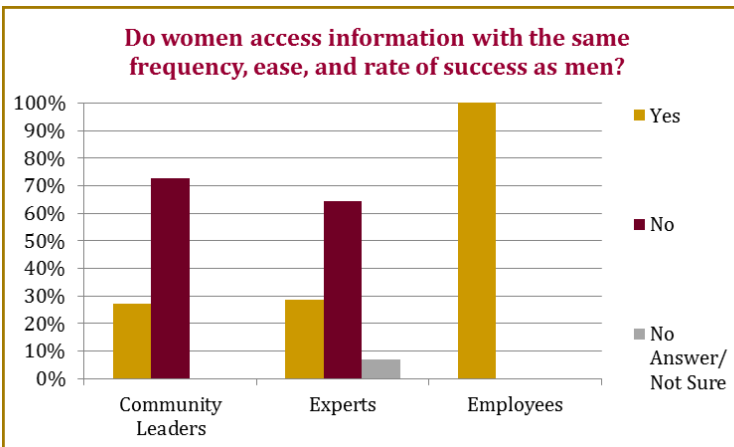
In Khagrachari, 22 community leaders and 14 experts were interviewed. Visits were made to eight government agencies, three times each, and interviews were conducted with 23 civil servants (3 women, 20 men) and 31 visitors to the agencies. The majority of community leaders (73 percent) and experts (64 percent) agreed that women **do not** access information at the same rate as men. Agency employees (100 percent) overwhelmingly said that they felt women and men **do** access information at the same rate.

Community leaders in Khagrachari responded that the greatest barriers facing women were lack of awareness, where to go and how to ask for information; illiteracy; and lack of law, justice, and security. Experts agreed on the top two barriers; however, the third barrier they identified was someone in the family not supportive/impedes access. Validation participants were of the opinion that women’s access to information was impacted by an overall lack of equal treatment by families/society, an inability to get proper information, and poverty, which restricts mobility to public agencies. Participants noted the importance of taking a collective approach with both

men and women as well as including all stakeholder groups—governments, elites, etc.—in order to improve access to information for women.

Community leaders (77 percent), experts (86 percent), and agency employees (39 percent) responded that access to information for women varies depending on their age. It is noteworthy that a high number of agency employees (26 percent) in Khagrachari provided “no response/doesn’t know” for this question.

Community leader data indicated that education, training, and land/property were the top three most valuable types of information for women in achieving greater economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights. At the validation, participants agreed that information related to education is a priority, specifically noting that education refers to both academic and noninstitutional settings as well as information about trainings and business opportunities for women.



What information would be most valuable to women for economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights?

1. Education
2. Training
3. Land/Property

Primary Obstacles to Women’s Access to Information: Community Leaders



1. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask
2. Illiteracy
3. Getting to public offices (mobility/distance/safety/domestic duties)
4. Lack of law/justice/security

Primary Obstacles to Women’s Access to Information: Experts



1. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask
2. Illiteracy
3. Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy

KHULNA DISTRICT

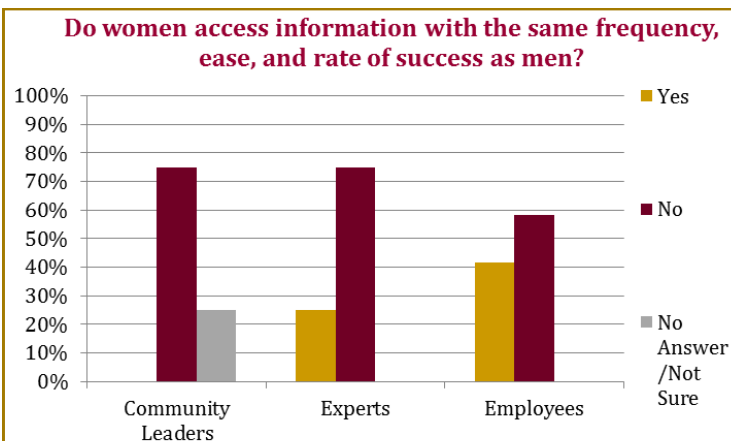
In Khulna, 20 community leaders and 12 experts were interviewed. Eight government agencies were visited by researchers on three different occasions each and interviews conducted with 24 civil servants (7 women, 17 men) and 34 visitors to the agencies. The majority of community leaders (75 percent), experts (75 percent), and employees at observation sites (58 percent) said that women **do not** access information at the same rate as men. Notably, none of the community leaders responded “yes” to this question; rather 25 percent either had no response or did not know, and Khulna was one of the few districts in which the majority of civil servants interviewed perceived a gender inequity. Additionally, community leaders (80 percent), experts (83 percent), and employees (83 percent) said that access to information for women varies depending on their age.

Community leaders in Khulna noted that the top three barriers facing women with respect to access to information are: information not seen as important to women, lack of awareness of where to go and how to ask, and someone in family not supportive/culturally not appropriate/paternalism. Khulna was one of the few districts where community leaders added that women may not understand the value of or be interested in information.

Participants at the validation disagreed with that finding, affirming that women are interested in getting information but that mindset, difficulties of getting to the office, and lack of confidence to seek information served as additional challenges. Experts also noted the barrier that religion might play. Interestingly, in Khulna, illiteracy was not noted as one of the key barriers to women’s access to information.

The participants agreed that barriers differ depending on a woman’s socio-economic status and geographical location. For instance, women from urban areas may not face the security related challenges of travel to public agencies that rural women face. Participants additionally noted the importance of being connected, that in general women do not get easy access to information unless they are a community leader/well known at the office.

Community leaders identified education, business related, and employment/right to work information as the most valuable to women for achieving economic empowerment and rights; validation participants were in agreement, but additionally noted the importance of agriculture, health, and social services information.



Primary Obstacles to Women’s Access to Information: Community Leaders



1. Information not seen as important to women
2. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask
3. Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy

Primary Obstacles to Women’s Access to Information: Experts



1. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask
2. Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy
3. Religion

What information would be most valuable to women for economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights?

1. Education
2. Business related/Trade
3. Employment/Right to work

RAJSHAHI DISTRICT

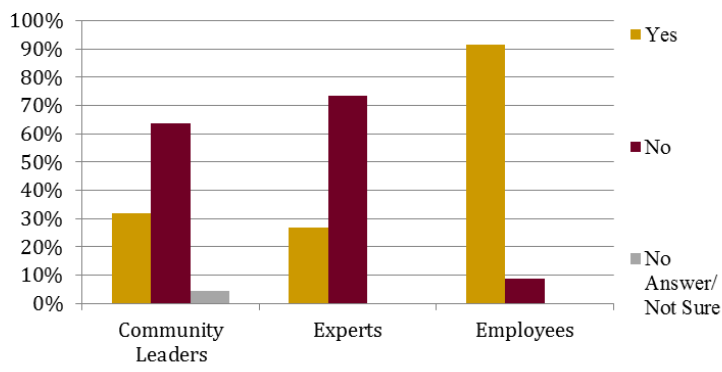
In Rajshahi, 22 community leaders and 15 experts were interviewed. A total of eight government agencies were visited on three different dates, and 23 interviews of civil servants (5 women, 18 men) and 25 interviews with visitors to the agencies were conducted. The majority of community leaders (64 percent) and experts (74 percent) agreed that women **do not** access information at the same rate as men. Agency employees (91 percent) overwhelmingly said that they felt women and men **do** access information at the same rate. Age was again seen as an important factor in women's access to information with the majority of each group interviewed saying that access varies depending on age: community leaders (95 percent), experts (92 percent), and civil servants (74 percent).

Both community leaders and experts identified illiteracy; someone in family not supportive/impedes; and lack of awareness, where to go, or how to ask as the main barriers facing women in exercising the right to information. Validation participants agreed that these were critical obstacles, additionally noting lack of financial independence, the mindset of men and society (patriarchy),

and fear of security while getting to agencies, among others.

Community leaders in Rajshahi stated that information related to education, land/property, and employment/right to work is the most valuable for women's economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights. When asked what kind of information women want most, validation participants agreed that education and business information are priorities, adding that women want to know how to apply for different allowances and social safety net funds, medical services, and income-generating activities, including loans and training. In the interviews, community leaders noted that women are less aware of their right to information. This was confirmed during the validation exercise, with participants saying that both government and NGOs should be involved in the process of distributing information about access to information and that all stakeholders need to be more aware of the right.

Do women access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men?



What information would be most valuable to women for economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights?

1. Education
2. Land/Property
3. Employment/Right to work

Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information: Community Leaders



1. Illiteracy
2. Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy
3. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask

Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information: Experts



1. Illiteracy
2. Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy
3. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask

RANGPUR DISTRICT

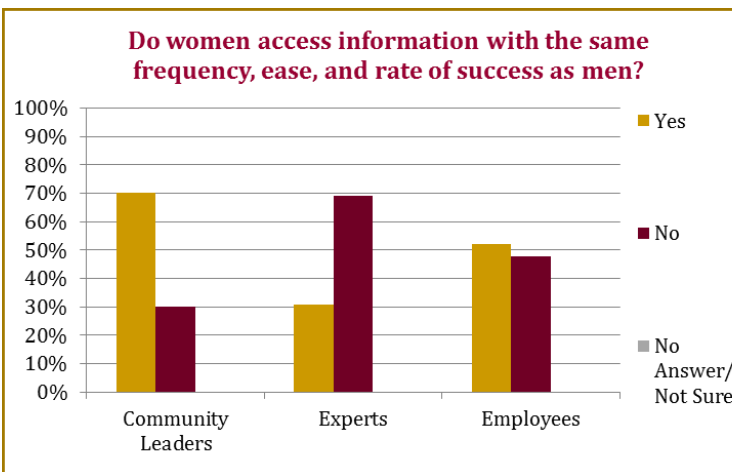
In Rangpur, 20 community leaders and 13 experts were interviewed. Researchers visited a total of eight government agencies three times each and conducted a total of 23 interviews with civil servants (9 women, 14 men) and 41 interviews with visitors to the agencies. Both community leaders (70 percent) and agency employees (52 percent) responded that they believe that women **do** access information with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men. Experts (70 percent) responded that they believed women **do not** access information as easily as men. This is notable as it is the only district in which more community leaders perceived women as having the same facility to exercise the right to information as did either the experts or the civil servants. While the validation participants largely agreed with the findings, they did emphasize a difference between women living in urban versus rural areas, with the more remote women having very little access to information or services.

Community leaders and experts in Rangpur responded that the greatest barriers that prevent women from accessing information are illiteracy; lack of awareness of the right or do not know where to go or how to ask for

information, with a few leaders questioning whether women understood the value of information; information not seen as important to women; and religion. Validation participants were in agreement with community leaders and experts; however, they also said that low socioeconomic status and patriarchal norms were additional barriers facing women's access to information. They noted that the frequency of getting information in Rangpur has increased and that the government is performing better, but that poor and rural women are not benefitting from these improvements at the same rate as others.

All three groups of respondents, community leaders (55 percent), experts (70 percent), and employees (74 percent) responded that access to information for women **does** vary depending on their age.

Community leaders and validation participants in Rangpur concurred that the information most valuable to women for achieving greater economic empowerment and rights was education, land/property, and employment/right to work.



What information would be most valuable to women for economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights?

1. Education
2. Land/Property
3. Employment/Right to work

Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information: Community Leaders



1. Illiteracy
2. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask
3. Someone in family not supportive/ impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy

Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information: Experts



1. Lack of awareness/do not know where to go or how to ask
2. Illiteracy
3. Someone in family not supportive/ impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy

SYLHET DISTRICT

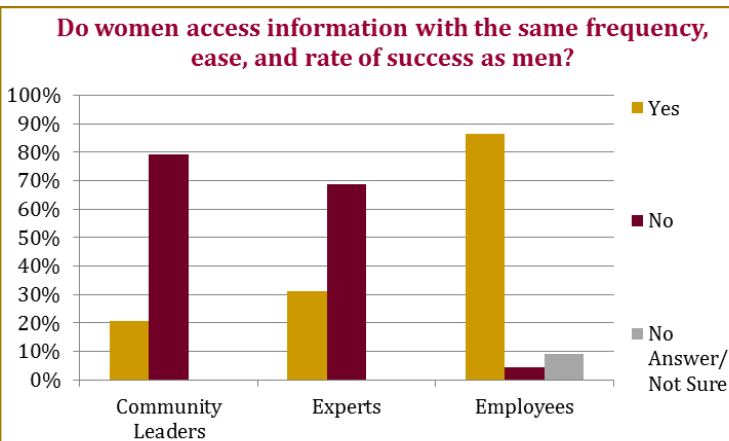
In Sylhet, 24 community leaders and 16 experts were interviewed. A total of eight government agencies were visited on three separate days, and 22 civil servants (4 women, 18 men) were interviewed as well as 37 visitors to the agencies. The majority of community leaders (79 percent) and experts (69 percent) agreed that women **do not** access information at the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men. Agency employees (86 percent) responded that they believe women **do** access information at the same rate as men. Overall, the validation participants said that they agreed with the perceptions of inequity voiced by the community leaders and experts.

Community leaders responded that the greatest barriers facing women were someone in family not supportive/ impedes, illiteracy, and mobility/time issues. In addition, in Sylhet the community leaders noted that poverty/ money for copies was another significant obstacle. Experts agreed about the top issues and also noted lack of awareness and where to go and how to ask for information as additional barriers. Validation participants included all of these barriers in their discussion, but also

mentioned women’s lack of confidence to seek/request information, the mindset of agency officers, and social perceptions about women as additional challenges.

Both community leaders (83 percent) and experts (69 percent) believed that access to information varies for women depending on their age. Employees (77 percent) overwhelmingly responded that they do not believe access to information varied for women based on age.

The types of information that community leaders identified as most valuable to women for achieving greater economic empowerment and rights were education, with a three-way tie for second place between training, financial support/loans, and law and justice. The validation participants agreed with the community leaders with regard to information about loans, as well as training and employment but, additionally, emphasized rights to seek medical care and information about social services.



What information would be most valuable to women for economic empowerment and promotion and protection of rights?

1. Education
2. Training, Financial support/Loans, and Law and justice (three-way tie)

Primary Obstacles to Women’s Access to Information: Community Leaders



1. Someone in family not supportive/ impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy
2. Illiteracy
3. Getting to public offices (mobility/distance/safety/domestic duties)

Primary Obstacles to Women’s Access to Information: Experts



1. Someone in family not supportive/ impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy
2. Illiteracy
3. Getting to public offices (mobility/distance/safety/domestic duties)

KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ The interviews and observational data collected during the study illustrate both differential access—that women are not accessing information with the same facility as men—and numerous barriers facing women in accessing government-held information in Bangladesh. While the aggregate of the districts for both community leaders and experts demonstrated the perception that women are not able to exercise the right with the same frequency, ease, and rate of success as men, there were a few notable districts where these inequities were not discerned.
- ◆ Though public employees were more likely to say that women access information with the same facility as men, observational data and feedback from validation meetings illustrated that women experience challenges or delays more often than their male counterparts.
- ◆ With the exception of one district’s civil servants, all community leaders, experts, and public officials perceived a difference in women’s access to information based on age. Validation participants considered age to serve as a proxy for impacts of education and marital status, with younger women having more schooling and therefore being more aware of the right and value of information, and married women having more responsibilities and less time to access information.
- ◆ Community leaders and experts across the six districts agreed that women are interested in accessing information and that both the national and local government hold important information for women.
- ◆ The aggregate data demonstrated a multitude of obstacles facing women in exercising the right to information, including:
 - ◆ Illiteracy
 - ◆ Lack of awareness/where to go or how to ask
 - ◆ Someone in family not supportive/impedes/culturally not appropriate/paternalism/patriarchy
 - ◆ Getting to public office (mobility/distance/safety/domestic duties)
- ◆ Though women who reach the agency are often satisfied with the response/receive requested information, the validation participants emphasized that this success largely is attributable to the characteristics of women entering public offices. They were described as leaders of community organizations, well-known to the public officials, and/or of greater socio-economic status/education.
- ◆ The most important information for the economic empowerment of Bangladeshi women relates to education, land/property, and employment/right to work. This was firmly expressed in every district in which the study was conducted. Community leaders also noted a need for greater information on starting a business, training, financial support/loans, government/social services, women’s rights, and law and justice.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY AND CONSIDERATIONS

- ◆ The methodology design, including lack of randomized sampling, results largely in perception-based findings that demonstrate the hypothesis that inequities exist and highlight trends related to women's access to information. It is not an exhaustive study, and results may vary based on interview subject and location.
- ◆ Nonparticipant observation sites were selected to provide illustrative examples of the interactions that take place within agencies representing key economic empowerment areas and rights. Due to variations in agency structures, the number of employees working on any given day, and other external factors, more interviews may have occurred at certain agencies, compared to other agencies in the sample.
- ◆ Employees at nonparticipant observation sites were asked to comment only on access to information within the context of their agency or office. Therefore, in responding to the interview questions, employees may not have been considering barriers to women's access to information that occur outside of the agency's walls. Had the question been formulated to generate speculation about external barriers, it is possible employees might have been less likely to answer that women access information at the same rate as men.
- ◆ All data collection occurred in the field with limited supervision from the Carter Center's Access to Information team. Once researchers had been fully trained on the methodology and best research practices, researchers independently implemented the methodology in their districts of origin. As such, variation in the application of the methodology may have occurred. When these variances were identified, The Carter Center attempted to mitigate their impact when possible.
- ◆ The selection of civil society and expert participants, in some cases, may have colored the nature of responses. Community leaders may have responded more from their own experience than on behalf of their communities. Also, both community leaders and experts may have highlighted their own areas of expertise.
- ◆ Women interviewed at the agencies may not be representative of the general population of women in Bangladesh. During the validation exercise, participants noted that women entering government offices often are more well-known and well-connected than women in general.
- ◆ For nonparticipant observation, researchers did not follow the methodology of interviewing multiple civil servants on each visit. While this reduced the number of interviews and may have impacted the magnitude of the trends identified, it does not negate the perceptions of those interviewed. There also were some errors in counting the number of people visiting the agencies and their gender disaggregation. Therefore, we have not included this data in the report.
- ◆ The study methodology does not include focal groups of unaffiliated women or individuals less likely to seek information/visit public offices. Interviews of civil society leaders who represent larger and more diverse populations were utilized in an attempt to capture the realities of these women, as were validation exercises that incorporated additional people from the study locale. However, this proxy may not always have been fully effective.
- ◆ The findings presented in this report were gathered through a careful analysis of the data. However, the interviews and nonparticipation reflections were initially done in Bangla and then translated into English. In so doing, some of the nuances of the interviews and researchers' considerations may have been lost.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On May 30, 2016, the Carter Center and Manusher Jonno Foundation, with the support of the Information Commission, Bangladesh, organized a joint stakeholder meeting to consider the findings from the Women and Access to Information study in Bangladesh, discuss the key obstacles facing women, and generate creative solutions to address gender inequities in the exercise of the fundamental right of access to information. Over 40 government representatives, community leaders, and civil society champions working to advance transparency, accountability, freedom of information, and women's rights came together to consider the challenges and to develop recommendations.

In the meeting, following a brief presentation of the national and department-specific findings of the study on Women and the Right of Access to Information in Bangladesh, participants divided into working groups to consider the primary obstacles facing women in the exercise of the right, such as illiteracy, lack of awareness of the right to information or where to go and how to ask for information, cultural barriers, lack of time and mobility, and mindset. Each group was tasked with considering the various facets of the obstacles, developing creative, practical and achievable recommendations for overcoming the barriers, and identifying the stakeholder group (government, civil society, or joint) most appropriate for implementing the defined action.

The following represents the consensus agreement of the participants and supporting inputs from participants in district validation exercises on urgent action steps necessary to reduce inequities, mitigate obstacles, and advance the right of access to information for women in Bangladesh:

THE GOVERNMENT AND INFORMATION COMMISSION, BANGLADESH, SHOULD:

1. Encourage the Coordination and Reforms unit of the Cabinet Division to consider RTI policy guidance and reforms through a gender-sensitive lens and with particular focus on assuring an equitable right to information. Policy reforms might include assuring women-friendly environments for all public offices and specific times for women visitors, annual performance agreements to include specific activities for women's access to information, gender disaggregation of data, and sufficient budget allocations for RTI and women.
2. Increase awareness of the right of access to information and the gender asymmetries in flows of information. Awareness-raising could include:
 - Periodic circulars related to RTI, and women and access to information
 - Use of public media and creative RTI messaging
 - Expanded inclusion of RTI in school curriculum and textbooks
 - Presentations at union and local fair
3. Provide additional specialized training for Designated Officers and Union Parishad representatives with focus on gender sensitivity, customer service, and support for illiterate requesters, and include the topic of women and access to information in all general trainings related to RTI.
4. Establish and deepen mechanisms to assure that information more effectively reaches women, including but not limited to:
 - Further identifying specific information needs for women
 - Increased proactive publication and dissemination of the information most relevant to women:
 - Develop information that is most meaningful to women; and
 - Disseminate information through multiple mediums, such as posters, billboards, leaflets, street theatre, village markets, community radio, SMS, and Television Placement of information in the community where women will have easiest access
 - Institute and support information centers at the union levels to be effective in providing information to women
 - Encourage capacity-building and expansion of government efforts to establish information ladies, such as Info Lady/Tottho Apa, and other similar door-to-door activities
 - Update websites and assure that information is current and accessible; and

- Identifying alternative conduits for sharing information, such as teachers, local level government officers, local elite, and elected representatives particularly female representatives
5. Provide support for women requesters, including the expansion of existing Information Helplines to provide targeted and gender sensitive assistance to women.

CIVIL SOCIETY SHOULD:

1. Increase awareness about the right of access to information for women and the value of information for increasing economic empowerment and the promotion and protection of rights, including but not limited to:
 - Face to face meetings /courtyard meetings
 - Sensitization workshops/Group meetings
 - Popularizing the right to information through popular mediums, such as the use of cartoons, dramas, puppets, films etc.
 - Use of traditional media, social media, and community radio, for example “right to information day observation”
 - Campaigns and advocacy
 - Development of information and educational materials, including non-formal education, posters, wall paintings, street theatres, etc.
 - Student brigades, debate competitions, and/or school information councils
2. Expand the use of infomediaries to more effectively reach women with meaningful information. The infomediaries, which may at times be volunteers, can serve to help educate about access to information, support and guide women seeking information, and assist in dissemination of public information so that it reaches women, including through use of technology.
3. Provide training and capacity building for organizations working with women to enhance their ability to utilize the right of access to information and to support women in making requests for and seeking information.
4. Develop a stakeholder group of community organizations and leaders, marginalized groups, professional associations etc. to:
 - Build demand for women’s access to information
 - Develop strategies for advancing women’s rights to information
 - Advocate for policy changes, and
 - Monitor efforts to more effectively reach women with access to information and its impact

THE GOVERNMENT, INFORMATION COMMISSION, BANGLADESH AND CIVIL SOCIETY SHOULD JOINTLY:

1. Establish multi-stakeholder committees to, among other things:
 - Coordinate efforts
 - Develop joint activities to advance the right of access to information for women
 - Share experiences and best practices
 - Cultivate incentives for increasing women’s access to information, and
 - Monitor progress and conduct periodic reviews
2. Develop campaigns and mechanisms to engage a cross-section of society to change mindsets and to support women’s access to information, such as opinion leaders, women’s representatives including female UP/ward members, service providers, religious leaders such as Imams/priests, family members, etc.
3. Integrate women and RTI into national celebrations such as RTI Day, Women’s Day etc.
4. Jointly advocate for full and effective implementation of the RTI Act, which will serve to support all persons including women’s access to information.



A young woman weaves a white sari with her brother. Photo: KarimPhoto / Shutterstock.com

ENDNOTES

¹ See: <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/CitizensAccessToInformationinSouthAsia.pdf>; <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38129/en/country-report:-the-right-to-information-in-bangladesh>.

² See: Carter Center Access to Information Implementation Assessment Tool: Selected Agencies in Bangladesh, www.cartercenter.org/accesstoinformation.html.

³ Only 24 of the 56 percent of government officials self-identified as such during interviews. Many categorized themselves as “other” and gave their title but either held elected or appointed local government positions. For the purposes of the breakout above, The Carter Center has placed them in the category of government officials based on their title. This percentage is potentially even higher.

THE CARTER CENTER ATTEMPTED TO MITIGATE IMPACTS OF VARIATIONS IN THE APPLICATION OF THE METHODOLOGY WHEN POSSIBLE.

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COVER PHOTO: A woman rears cows at Inani, Cox's Bazar. Photo: Golam Rahman

