

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL SERVICE

Supporting Social Movements

2022 Practicum



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PREFACE

The Manusher Jonno Foundation is an incredibly impressive and unusual organization that deserves to be far better known beyond its native Bangladesh. In its 20 years, it has helped transform how people think about and work towards social inclusion, human rights, and public accountability in Bangladesh. This is no mean feat: Bangladesh is a challenging country in which to work, where millions live with poverty and marginalization, an intermittent relationship with democracy, and the ever-present crisis of climate change lapping at its low-lying shores. Yet it is also a country that has transformed its prospects in only 50 years, from what was once called the ‘basket case’ to a high-growth economy with some of the best and most inclusive human development policies in South Asia. Bangladesh is particularly well known for the innovative approaches to tackling exclusion and deprivation pioneered by its non-governmental organizations and groups.

The Manusher Jonno Foundation (“Foundation for the People” or MJF) has been part of that story of progressive and inclusive change. MJF is a unique organization in that its entire purpose is to support grassroots organizations and movements of the very people who are fighting for their rights. MJF has provided finance, organizational development assistance, technical inputs, and moral support to these groups on the frontlines of human rights and accountability struggles. MJF has successfully channeled almost USD 100 million to organizations representing some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. At a time when funders are seeking ways of supporting social movements, MJF’s story is one that stands out.

I have been lucky enough to know MJF and its Executive Director, Shaheen Anam, for many years. I have visited several of their partner projects around the country and worked with the MJF team to capture some of their numerous and important lessons about what works to strengthen the human rights of people living with poverty, violence, and climate change. As a scholar of the politics of Bangladesh’s surprising development success, I have long wanted the opportunity to reflect on what MJF does, how it does it, and what it has learned while doing it. The MA Practicum course at the School of International Service at American University provided that opportunity: it made it possible for me to work with a team of exceptionally committed and capable postgraduate students to spend time (virtually, sadly) with the committed experts in the Manusher Jonno Foundation team and some of their amazing partner organizations.

It has been a remarkable learning experience for us all. For the MJF team, it has been another lesson in how hard it is to summarize their and their partners’ work in brief: so much has been done and achieved, and so many lives have been changed for the better, that the struggle to explain it all is real. Above all, the Practicum team has produced a valuable high-level analysis of MJF’s learning about how to support social movements—what has worked, and, sometimes, what has not. They have looked into what happens when human rights groups campaign for the rights of marginalized and disempowered people, at efforts to combat violence against women and girls, at how civil society groups have been working to promote accountability and responsiveness in government, and at how they have helped people adapt to the slow-burn crisis and the rapid onset disaster that is climate change. These American University MA students have taken a sustained look at the struggles people face to realize their most basic rights and learned about how sustained collective action—and champions in high places—can make a real difference.

This is a vitally important analysis because international aid donors increasingly recognize that project-oriented NGOs and consulting firms cannot deliver the sustainable, empowering, and inclusive change they seek. Learning from organizations like MJF is now at a premium. MJF shows that it is possible for international aid to reach the most marginalized and vulnerable people and to do so in ways that empower them to forge their own paths towards progressive and inclusive change. The Accountability Research Center at American University aims to learn from the experiences of frontline and grassroots actors, which is why MJF has become one of our partners. MJF offers valuable lessons about strategies for empowering change and the infrastructure that social movements need to sustain their efforts over time, across issues and sectors, and in the face of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

If you are an international aid donor or philanthropic foundation, a policymaker or practitioner focused on social inclusion and empowerment, a researcher of civil society or social movements in the global South, or an activist or NGO leader yourself, you will find much to learn from in this report.

*Naomi Hossain, Washington DC, April 26, 2022,
Accountability Research Center at the School of
International Service, American University.*

Executive Summary

About This Report

This report was prepared as part of American University's graduate level practicum course Supporting Social Movements. It aimed to learn from the Manusher Jonno Foundation's twenty years of work providing financial, technical, moral, and movement-building support to almost 500 of Bangladesh's many non-governmental organizations, civil society, and human rights groups, reaching many millions of the world's most vulnerable people. It also aimed to share those lessons about the challenging work of supporting social movements with activists, practitioners, and potential funders.



The community whom MJF work for fisherfolk, youth, ethnic people, working children and girl child

About The Manusher Jonno Foundation

The Manusher Jonno Foundation ("Foundation for the People" or "MJF") is a non-governmental, non-profit foundation in Bangladesh that funds and works in partnership with local organizations to improve the lives of people living with marginalization and poverty. MJF has been operating in Bangladesh since 2002 with the mission of:

Promoting human rights and governance through partnership with relevant stakeholders, including duty bearers, to ensure dignity and wellbeing of all people, especially the marginalised.

Registered as an independent Bangladeshi foundation in 2006, the organization has worked with partners operating in 53 out of the country's 64 districts, managing almost USD 100 million (equivalent), which it has channeled to nearly 500 organizations to strengthen their capacities to deliver change for their members. [1] MJF works by:

- channeling funding from international aid donors to selected grassroots groups, human rights organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and social movements;
- supporting partner organizations with organizational development, financial management, monitoring, evaluation, and learning; and
- undertaking campaigns, advocacy, and research to create national, international, and local constituencies for change.

MJF's vision is of a world free of poverty, exploitation, and discrimination where people live in freedom, dignity, and human security. Since 2002, the MJF team has worked closely with close to 500 partner organizations to make this possible.

This report serves as a reflection of the important work that MJF has done in the past 20 years. Although MJF has worked on a wide range of human rights and related issues with a variety of partner organizations, this report focuses on MJF's work in four key areas: Building Accountable and Responsive Governance, Tackling Marginalization and Discrimination, Violence Against Women and Girls, Climate Change Adaption.

BUILDING ACCOUNTABLE AND RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE

Building Accountable and Responsive Institutions focuses on strengthening citizens' capacities to hold local government to account and government capacities to respond to citizens' claims and demands. Key lessons from this work include:

- Strengthening public institutions needs active collaboration between the government and civil society. Both working to build citizens' demand for good governance and the state's capacity for delivery are necessary.
- Governance reform needs to meet people where they are. MJF partner organizations work to ensure people can participate in budgeting decisions, monitor local government services and performance, and amplify their voice on their most pressing issues and needs.
- Improving service delivery institutions and using social accountability tools to bring citizen power to bear on building accountable and responsive governance are iterative and long-term processes, not one-off exercises.
- Strengthening public institutions and accountability to citizens requires working at grassroots and national levels, bringing grassroots perspectives to the center and tackling obstacles to reform that start at the center.

TACKLING MARGINALIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION

Tackling Marginalization and Discrimination by focusing on MJF's partners' work empowering people experiencing the most extreme forms of social exclusion, stigma, and disadvantage, including the Dalit (or 'untouchable' caste) community members, ethnic and religious minorities, or people in stigmatized and low-status occupations such as fisherfolk and sex workers. Key lessons include:

- MJF's partner organizations tackle some of the most entrenched forms of marginalization and vulnerability for people experiencing discrimination, exclusion, or violence on grounds of ethnicity, caste, gender, or occupation.
- Extreme poverty and discrimination intersect in complex ways to disempower people; MJF's partner human rights groups and social movements take a long-term approach to empowerment that builds people's collective strength to combat injustice.
- Empowered people need capable governments; MJF works closely with state actors to build their capacities to respond to the needs and demands of marginalized citizens.
- MJF understands that changing cultural views on marginalized communities is a daunting task, and their partners work with government institutions to change and enforce laws designed to protect the marginalized.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Combating Violence Against Women and Girls looks closely at MJF's partners' experiences with different strategies for defending against violence, including work with men and boys to change social norms and behaviors. Key lessons from MJF's extensive work with partner organizations combating violence against women and girls include:

- When women are equipped with leadership skills and self-confidence, they can be empowered to join collective action and speak up against discrimination and violence.
- MJF's partners and programs attempt to undermine the deep-rooted patriarchy embedded in Bangladesh's society by including men and boys in the collective fight for gender equality.
- MJF has worked in successful partnerships with policymakers, lawyers, and other civil society organizations and women's rights groups to push for laws to protect women and girls against violence.
- To eliminate systemic discrimination and barriers ingrained in service-providing institutions, MJF partners liaise with and provide training for healthcare workers and police officers to ensure victims and survivors of violence receive the protection, care, and support they need.

CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION

Climate Change Adaptation, in particular community-based work on institutionalizing coping strategies and equipping local governments with the skills to respond to citizens' needs in the context of rising sea levels and 'natural' disasters. This is the newest area of MJF's work and one which is growing in importance. Key lessons about MJF's and their partners' approaches to supporting climate change-related adaptation include:

- MJF takes a participatory approach to building climate-adaptive communities so that local solutions can be brought to bear on global problems.
- In the past five years, MJF's partners have taken a two-track approach: building resilient communities while also advocating for policies that take a more inclusive, ground-up approach to climate change.
- MJF acts as a bridge between marginalized communities and local government representatives to foster learning, dialogue, and change and ensure access to much-needed services.

Each of these four case studies explores the nature of the issues MJF and their partners are addressing, the strategies used by MJF and partner organizations, and key lessons that have been learned along the way.

Key Lessons

1. In 20 years of supporting social movements and human rights across Bangladesh, MJF has proven that **it is possible to empower the world's most vulnerable and marginalized people**.
2. MJF has supported almost 500 organizations that work to both strengthen people's rights while also **building capacities of government** to deliver those rights.
3. Almost **nine million of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people have benefited** from MJF's support to their partner organizations. They have gained access to public services, gained protections from discrimination and violence, and been helped to adapt to climate change.
4. MJF's partner organizations work with people who face the most extreme forms of discrimination, rights violations, and poverty. They **work with groups and leaders from the communities they seek to serve** to combat these issues.
5. Recognizing that **unity and collective action are vital for people to claim their rights**, MJF provides development, finance, and national and international networking for grassroots groups working to build their collective power to achieve goals.
6. Through **policy advocacy and campaigning in communities, in government, and in global policy spaces**, MJF's work demands the attention of policymakers and the public, and amplifies the voice of those at risk of being left behind.
7. MJF is the embodiment of Bangladesh supporting Bangladesh. Through the **power of the collective, forgotten voices are heard from the local level up to the government**.



Ethnic people are making gadgets using bamboo

Introduction

This report was prepared as part of American University's graduate level practicum course Supporting Social Movements, led by Naomi Hossain. The report aimed to learn from the Manusher Jonno Foundation's 20 years of work providing financial, technical, moral, and movement-building support to almost 500 of Bangladesh's many non-governmental organizations, civil society, and human rights groups. It also aimed to share those lessons about the challenging work of supporting social movements with activists, practitioners, and potential funders.

A group of twelve students worked in close collaboration with Manusher Jonno Foundation staff and partners between January and April 2022 to prepare this reflection of their work in Bangladesh. Over the course of four months, graduate students studied and retrieved academic sources from MJF, conducted in-depth interviews from staff, and maintained communication with the organization to present findings in an accurate and authentic manner. The graduate students involved in this report include the following: Urwah Ahmad, Alvina Ahmed, Jonathan Blackmon, Allegra Carson, Rachel Crocker, Sadie Daugherty, Samantha Kaiser, Bilal Rana Muhammad, Kennedy O'Shea, Awrad Saleh, JohnGates Sharp, and Samantha Smith.



HISTORY OF MJF

BACKGROUND TO THE MANUSHER JONNO FOUNDATION

Manusher Jonno Foundation started its operations in 2002 as a grant-managing agency of CARE Bangladesh for a multi-year project called Human Rights and Governance. The project was funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom (now the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)). It was designed to support Bangladesh civil society in its efforts to make the government more responsive and accountable to the needs of its poorest and most marginalized citizens. Having achieved immense progress in building beneficiaries' knowledge of demand for their rights, the Foundation was registered as an independent organization in 2006 by the government of Bangladesh's main regulatory agency for non-profit institutions, the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB).

Since its inception, MJF has retained its focus on funding, supporting, and strengthening human and institutional capacity building of grassroots-level organizations working on critical issues in human rights and governance. The Foundation is involved in the end-to-end process of grant disbursement, from setting out selection criteria and screening proposals to monitoring and evaluation, and ensuring efficient financial management, transparency, and overall project success. In doing this, MJF's goal is broader than executing a one-time project; rather, it makes targeted efforts to build the capacity of its partner NGOs and augment their core competencies. MJF defines capacity development as a long-term, systematic, and participatory process that positively transforms an organization's core systems and capabilities to increase its effectiveness, performance, and sustainability. Over the years, MJF has gained the confidence of international aid donors by setting and following the very highest standards of transparency and accountability for itself and for the organizations it supports and nurtures. This confidence is a testament to its success and commitment to supporting social movements and citizen groups in Bangladesh.

MJF has partnered with the civil sector, NGOs, community-based organizations, the private sector, and the government since 2002. Since its inception, MJF has designed programs to empower the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized groups for the fulfillment of their fundamental rights. This includes access to various social services, such as health, education, water, fair wages, and safe working conditions. The Foundation has also worked extensively to improve the local governance structure, ensure more equitable budget allocations, and support inclusion in public institutions, often using citizen monitoring, social audits, and community scorecards as social accountability tools. Moreover, it has raised its voice against social injustice, human rights violations, and discrimination, directly addressing violence against women and girls, rights of minorities, the elderly and disabled, and poor rural communities. In doing this, MJF has adhered to its **vision** of **"a world free from poverty, exploitation and discrimination where people live in freedom, dignity and human security"** as well as its **mission** to **"promote human rights and governance through partnership with relevant stakeholders, including duty bearers, to ensure dignity and wellbeing of all people, especially the marginalised."**

MJF's distinct comparative advantage is embedded in its strong networks of local citizen activism. It draws on this local level activism and the voices of the poor and feeds these into its policy reform discussions with government and officials at multiple levels. This approach has been central to its ability to scale up localized successes. By December 2022, MJF will have promoted rights and equality for 1.64 million people through its flagship Excluded People's Rights (EPR) project. Through its continued engagement with civil society and the government, MJF has influenced progressive and pro-poor laws such as the Right to Information Act, the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, and the Child Labor Elimination policy. The Right to Information Act has been used by NGOs and landless people to gain information on Khas land (government land or water bodies that should be allocated to the poorest families) and improve their access to economic opportunities.



Farmers harvesting paddy using a machine



Over the years, MJF has emerged as one of the largest grant-making organizations in Bangladesh due to its impeccable record of implementing complex projects. **MJF has administered funds amounting to almost USD 100 million over 20 years, the vast majority of which has gone towards direct support for organizations of the marginalized and vulnerable poor.** The Foundation has disbursed funds and strengthened local communities at the basic administrative levels prone to inefficiencies and injustice in the delivery of public goods and services. Having worked with several major international donors and multilateral organizations, MJF has gained valuable experience by partnering with almost 500 partner NGOs and taking part in around 700 projects in the past 20 years. These projects have ranged from policy advocacy to working for social, political, and economic empowerment of civil society and marginalized communities. MJF's rights-based programming has helped the government in addressing the underlying causes of poverty and achievement of sustainable development goals. In its 20 years of history, MJF programs have been conceptually and strategically consistent with the relevant provisions of the Constitution of Bangladesh, national development plans, and the government's Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.

MJF: A UNIQUE ORGANIZATION

MJF was designed with the vision of a national civil society organization enjoying complete autonomy and independence, accountable to a Governing Board, free from outside interference to outline the agenda for Human Rights and Governance work in Bangladesh. Despite intentions to ensure its autonomy, **there has been pressure from funders to show 'results' in the form of quantifiable benefits and beneficiaries**, and to highlight the source of the funds. This is at odds with the substance of MJF's work, which is to build the autonomy and strength of Bangladeshi civil society and has been a source of tension and a challenge for MJF. But the MJF team has pushed back and works hard at influencing the thinking around empowerment, accountability, and human rights in the international aid arena.



Working children who have withdrawn from hazardous labor are now enjoying normal life

MJF is a unique organization that funds smaller NGOs, civil society organizations, and social movements working for the rights of the most marginalized communities in Bangladesh. **MJF typically works with organizations that larger international aid donors would be unable to directly fund because of high transaction costs and risks.** MJF supports CSOs who have been working in public service delivery, including microcredit, food security, education, and health. MJF operates on the concept of a rights-based approach, where services for disadvantaged people are a right and not a charity.

MJF acts as an intermediary between donors and small, local CSOs in Bangladesh. Because MJF believes that these local CSOs are paramount to the development work in Bangladesh, they provide capacity building to assist these organizations in becoming independent, sustainable organizations that do not require support to receive funding from larger international aid donors. **By setting high standards while building the capacity of local aid organizations,** MJF has helped countless smaller organizations stay afloat and continue their work on important development issues in Bangladesh.

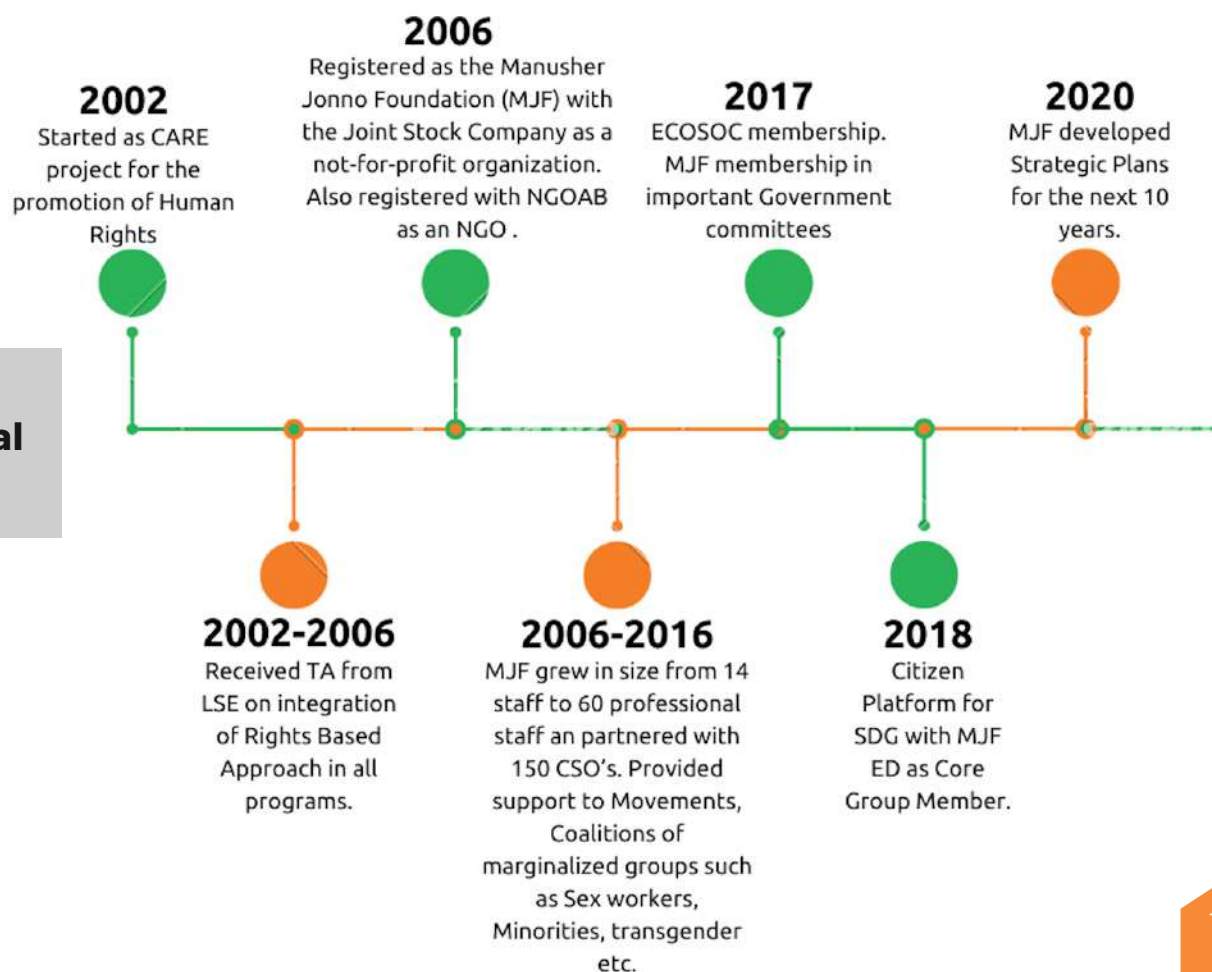
MJF also provides significant support to social movements throughout Bangladesh, including funding coalition movements of sex workers, minority people, and the so-called 'untouchable' community. MJF aims to not only empower these marginalized communities but help them learn how to advocate for themselves. This work stems from the original idea that MJF should be able to support social movements in Bangladesh for improved human rights and accountable government, demanding better governance and inclusivity so that everybody's rights are respected, to build a more harmonious and inclusive society.

MAJOR MILESTONES

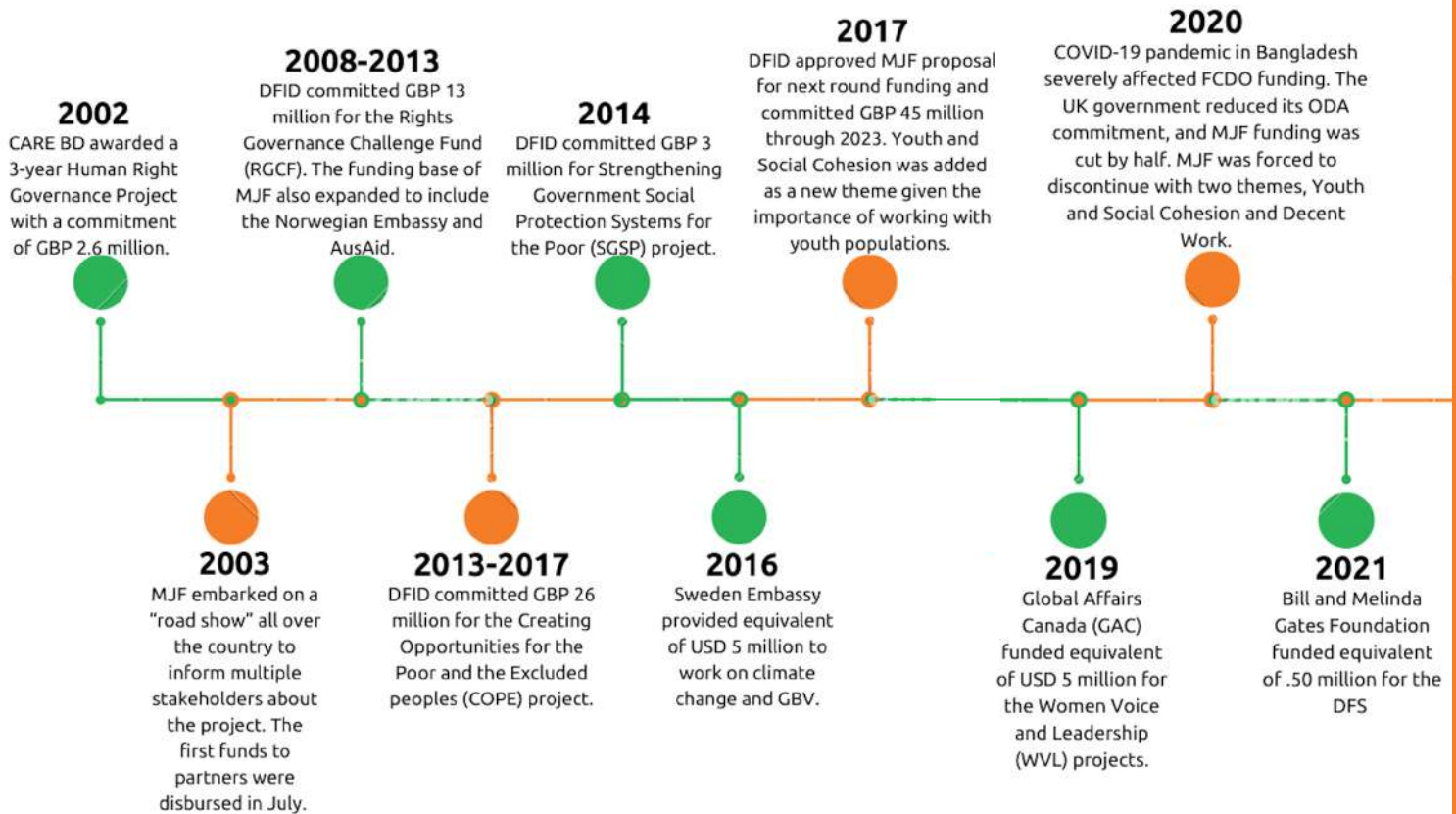
Over the past two decades, MJF has not only funded smaller NGOs to keep working on important human rights issues in Bangladesh but has worked tirelessly to improve the governance of the NGO sector in Bangladesh, helping civil society leaders realize that integrity is vital and that sustainability means maintaining high standards. What follows is a general history including certain major achievements of their work over the past 20 years.

In 2002, DFID awarded CARE Bangladesh a 3-year, GBP 13 million Human Rights Governance project to support civil society organizations working on critical themes of human rights and good governance. Shaheen Anam, coordinator of CARE Bangladesh's largest project at the time, was named the Team Leader. A steering committee consisting of eminent Bangladeshi citizens was selected to provide oversight and strategic guidance. This project was named Manusher Jonno (MJ), meaning "for the people," and was designed to become a national entity under Bangladeshi law within three to four years. To decide core, focus areas of work, MJ decided to support issues of critical importance in line with its core principles of diversity, inclusion, participation, and gender sensitivity. MJ chose to support the following areas of work: rights and security of women and girls; ensuring rights of the most marginalized; enabling decent working conditions for workers in the formal and informal sectors; and responsive public institutions. They have remained committed to these areas with very little variation throughout the entirety of its existence.

MJF Organizational Milestones



MJF Funding Milestones



In 2003, MJF embarked on a "road show" as a public outreach campaign to inform stakeholders about the project and its mission. As a result, the first-round call for proposals attracted 400 applications. Of these 400 applicants, MJ selected 25 organizations to support, focusing on work in the formal and informal sectors using selection guidelines and policies approved by CARE and the Steering committee. The first funds to partners were disbursed in July of 2003. In 2006, MJ was registered as the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) with the Joint Stock Company as a not-for-profit-organization and soon after received NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) registration, making it eligible to receive foreign funds.

Between 2007 and 2013, DFID committed GBP 13 million for the Rights Governance Challenge Fund (RGCF). During this time, MJF grew from 14 professional staff to 35, expanded its network and partner base from 25 to 100, and expanded its funding base to also include the Norwegian Embassy and AusAid. Besides providing funds, MJF support to partners for institution strengthening became an important factor for credibility and confidence among donors.

MJF's support to movements of marginalized groups from 2009 to present enabled these communities to raise their voices and demand services and inclusion. Gradually, through their projects, MJF began to be recognized as a strong advocacy unit having developed sectoral expertise among staff, playing an important role in passing three major pieces of legislation.

MJF played an important role in the passing of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2009. RTI ensures the free flow of information to citizens, allowing citizens to seek information from authorities, an important step in ensuring transparency and accountability in public institutions.

In 2010, MJF helped pass the Domestic Violence Prevention Act. The Act ensures a victim's immediate rights to the required and necessary medical services, the services of enforcement officers, necessary legal services, and to file complaints under any other law. The passage of this Act is especially significant in Bangladesh, as it represents the first recognition of the problem of domestic violence by the government.

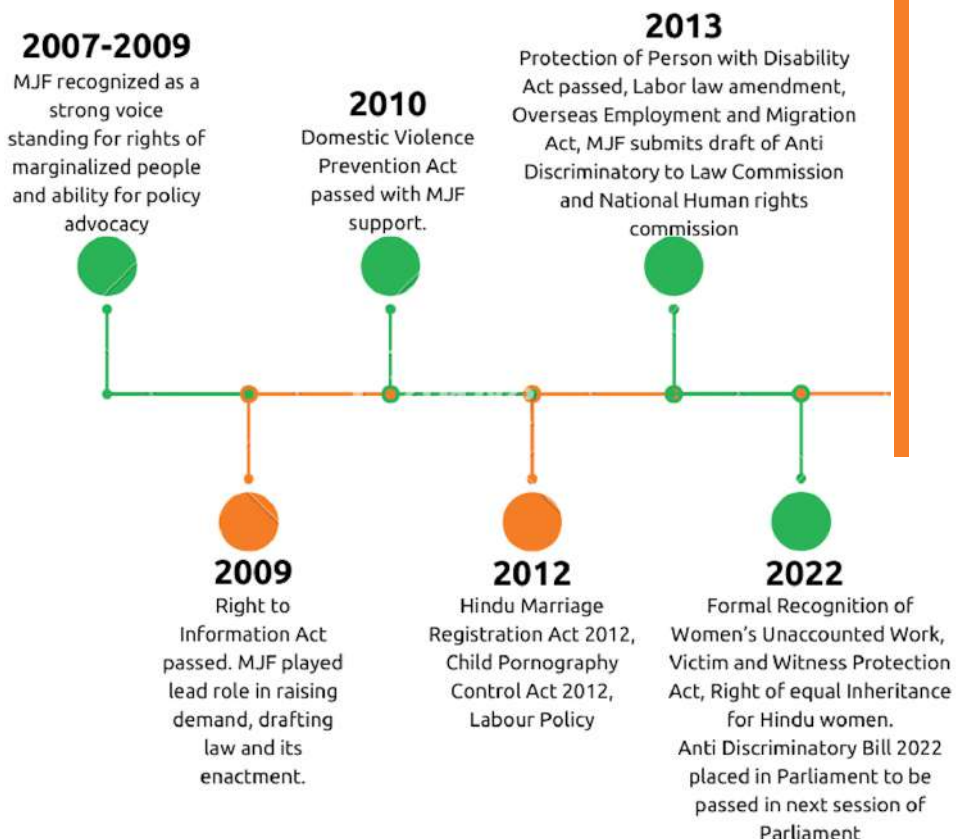
In 2013, MJF helped pass the Protection of Person with Disability Act. This Act repealed and replaced the Disability Welfare Act of 2001 and shifted the lens on people with disabilities from a welfare-based approach to a rights-based approach. The Act provides inclusive education, the reservation of seats on all forms of public transport, accessibility provisions for all public places, equal opportunities in employment, and the protection of inherited property rights.

In 2017, DFID approved MJF's proposal for next round funding and committed GBP 45 million through 2023. Youth and Social Cohesion was added as a new theme given the importance of working with youth populations. Also in 2017, the Swedish Embassy provided the equivalent of USD 5 million to work on climate change. In 2019, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) funded the Women Voice and Leadership (WVL) projects.

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government reduced its ODA commitment, and MJF's funding was cut by half. MJF was forced to discontinue two themes: Youth and Social Cohesion and Decent Work. However, MJF developed its Strategic Plans for the next 10 years and decided to continue work in the following areas: gender justice; climate change; rights of marginalized communities including sexual, religious, and ethnic minorities; and strengthening public institutions at both national and local levels.

As MJF steps into 20 years of providing support to grassroots movements and organizations, it aims to continue expanding its funding base. MJF's strengths are its strong networks and coalitions across multiple stakeholders, committed and experienced staff, state of the art systems and policies, and credibility among donors as a transparent, accountable organization with a strong Governing Board that takes its oversight role seriously.

MJF Advocacy Milestones



PERSISTING CHALLENGES

Since achieving national independence in 1971, Bangladesh has made impressive development gains and was proclaimed “a model for poverty reduction” by the World Bank in 2020. The country has performed exceptionally on multiple human development indicators and is the first large country to move out of ‘Least Developed Country’ status. However, millions of people remain deprived of access to social services, good governance, and equal opportunities. For Bangladesh’s development momentum to continue, it is critical that vulnerable and marginalized groups receive equal rights and are involved in decision making at all administrative levels. Constraints in civil spaces, inconsistencies in the legal processes, corruption, and a polarized political atmosphere make it difficult for the poor to utilize public services to their advantage. Manusher Jonno Foundation has prominently promoted civic engagement in the country by constructively engaging civil society organizations, particularly at the local level. MJF’s unique strength is its close linkages with these civil society groups, which aid donors find hard to fund directly because of the high transaction costs and risks. Going forward, MJF is committed to rising to the multiple challenges civil society and marginalized communities face in Bangladesh with the strength and resourcefulness of its staff and unique programming. It will give practical support to enable the poor to claim their rights, make service providers aware of their responsibilities, and assist communities to monitor their performance.



Water supply arrangement for Chattogram Hill Tracts ethnic community in their village

CASE STUDIES

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**BUILDING ACCOUNTABLE AND
RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE**

**TACKLING MARGINALIZATION
AND DISCRIMINATION**

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**COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG)**

**COMMUNITY-BASED CLIMATE
CHANGE ADAPTATION**

49

BUILDING ACCOUNTABLE AND RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE



KEY MESSAGES:

- To strengthen public institutions, MJF believes that there must be active collaboration between the government and representatives of civil society.
- The Foundation has also worked extensively to improve local governance structure, equitable budget allocation, and inclusivity in public institutions through social accountability tools such as citizen monitoring, social audits, and community score cards.
- Reforming service delivery institutions and the training of staff and citizens in implementing social accountability tools to build more accountable and responsive governance must be iterative processes, and not one-off exercises.
- Working in civil spaces is critical at both the grassroot and the national levels to ensure the success of social accountability measures and the strengthening of public institutions.

THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN BANGLADESH

Accountable public institutions and good governance are at the heart of development and poverty reduction.[2] However, reforming these institutions is a difficult and complex process, both technically and politically. It requires broad consensus and unflinching commitment to improving their capacity, transparency, and openness. Bangladesh has achieved many successes on social and economic development indicators in the last two decades. The country has been admired globally for its accomplishments in health, education, and women empowerment—from reducing mother and child mortality to providing equitable opportunity for education, especially for females. The World Bank referred to Bangladesh as a “model of poverty reduction” in 2020.[3] In this success story, civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have contributed significantly. However, human development in the country continues to be impeded by unaccountable public institutions that are not responsive to the needs of their constituents, especially the poor and marginalized. These institutions are marred by corruption, clientelism, and bad governance, which continue to hamper Bangladesh’s development agenda.[4]

Since Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, the country has “experienced eight regimes with a variety of political systems... Every government has undertaken different initiatives for sociopolitical development, administrative improvements, and economic security.”[5] According to a 2006 Centre for Governance Studies report on Bangladesh, the “Political turmoil and violence, the politicization of the public administration and concerns that corruption obstructs private sector investment and public service delivery are key elements of what is widely deemed a ‘crisis of governance.’”[6] Bangladesh’s human development index, evaluated by the World Bank, ranked 133 out of 189 countries and territories in 2020.[7] The World Bank’s latest Worldwide Governance Indicators, based on data from 2020, rank Bangladesh in the



20th percentile for government effectiveness, the 16th percentile for regulatory quality, the 31st percentile for rule of law, the 17th percentile for control of corruption, and the 27th percentile for voice and accountability. [8] In Transparency International’s corruption perceptions index, Bangladesh’s score has remained stagnant since 2018, and the country ranked 147 out of 180 in 2021.[9] The consequences of these administrative weaknesses are stark and sobering: millions of people remain deprived of basic services such as health, education, clean water, social safety, and employment. According to official estimates, over 39 million people in Bangladesh were still living below the national poverty line before the pandemic, and 20 million of them were extremely poor. [10]

In 2020, Transparency International found that “only a few isolated cases of government corruption were publicly disclosed because the government placed greater effort on preventing stories of corruption from leaking than on taking action against corruption itself.”[11] This leads to mismanagement of funding, insufficient or lack of spending on

basic public facilities, limited coverage in the poorest areas, and poor quality of public services. Moreover, the government lacks resources and willingness to ensure the monitoring of the efficiency of these public services, particularly at the local administrative levels. Due to the prevalent political and bureaucratic system, millions of people in Bangladesh remain deprived of essential public services as they lack collective power to raise their voices against such social injustice. Even when the policies or laws are in place, their implementation at the ground level remains dysfunctional. Despite the country's efforts, many government innovations have not been institutionalized, which has resulted in only temporary improvements. Thus, "good institutions are necessary for sustaining higher growth and progress with other indicators of development including poverty reduction and social equity." [12]

Another issue is the lack of coordination among different entities and levels of governance, which results in marginalized and vulnerable populations being deprived of public services. [13] According to MJF,

***Apart from central government which is plagued by serious accountability, transparency and integrity deficits, the common problems of the local public institutions are 'inadequate citizen engagement, lack of accountability, transparency and inefficiency of the local public institutions hindering service delivery to the people, especially the poor and marginalised.'* [14]**

This was also highlighted in the revised National Strategies for Accelerated Poverty Reduction-II, which "also emphasizes the importance of local governance, protection of the vulnerable, especially women, and the efficient delivery of public services through effective public institutions." [15] Accountability mechanisms at the local level remain weak because fiscally, Bangladesh is highly centralized, and local governments have little financial autonomy. [16] The policies for decentralization in Bangladesh have differentiated between accountability and administrative efficiency, but the "vertical accountability of administrative and service delivery efficiency at the subnational level remains weak." [17]

Bangladesh's public institutions do not have a culture of inviting citizen feedback. Yet accountable and responsive socio-political institutions require active citizen participation, which encourages proper resource allocation, minimizes corruption, and increases responsiveness to citizen demands. [18] Feedback is essential—without it, government agencies lack understanding of citizens' needs and their own performance. For example, the 2009 Right to Information (RTI) Act was supposed to allow citizens to seek information from authorities. [19] but the "status of information seeking is very low, attitude of the duty bearers is still not pro-people, institutions lack capacity on information management, and people are not willing enough to claim information as needed." [20] Additionally, "downward accountability

towards the beneficiaries is quite flawed as evident in several social service programs including poverty alleviation programs implemented at the village levels.”[21] Although formal committees exist, beneficiary representatives remain absent or are deliberately disenfranchised “by an unholy coalition of project government officials and rural elites.”[22]



Chattogram Hill Tracts ethnic women celebrating a festival event

During the pandemic, poverty levels have risen in Bangladesh to 30%.[23] and due to lack of preparedness and inadequate capacity, the Government of Bangladesh has been unable to effectively target the provision of social safety net packages for marginalized groups.[24] The pandemic has further exacerbated existing socio-economic inequality and exclusion,[25] revealing that Bangladesh needs institutions that are strengthened by their encounters with crisis, given the range of global crises that Bangladesh is exposed to—climate change, food security, economic, and health.[26]

Against this backdrop of weak and unaccountable state institutions, civil society and NGOs have risen to prominence and are helping to complement, activate, and create pressure on the state to perform for its citizens.

MJF'S APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Strengthening public institutions is central to MJF's mission to promote human rights and inclusive development to empower those whose voices are seldom heard. Since its inception, MJF has focused on funding, supporting, and strengthening the human and institutional capacity of grassroots-level organizations working on critical issues in human rights and governance. The significance of these civil society organizations has grown immensely from a donor perspective, as have their abilities to impact public policy and political decision-making. MJF's partner organizations use social accountability to strengthen the social contract between the people and the state in a way that empowers them to claim public services as their right. In doing so, it challenges political and economic power structures to demand these rights. MJF exercises social accountability through a diverse range of strategies ranging from demanding good governance in public service delivery to influencing laws and policies to better design participatory approaches for transparent and equitable access to services. MJF works alongside the government to curb the structurally entrenched causes of the social and political exclusion of the poor. Hence, the Foundation tries to bridge the chasm between the citizens' needs and public services using social accountability tools and empowering local communities.

PROJECT NAME	NO. OF BENEFICIARIES
CITIZEN ACTION FOR RESULTS, TRANSPARENCY AND ACTION	5,250
PROTECTION FOR WORKING CHILDREN (PWC)	1,150
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR POOR AND EXCLUDED (COPE)	690,291
EXCLUDED PEOPLE'S RIGHTS (EPR)	658,712
RIGHT AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGE FUND (RGCF)	7,546,747
IMPROVING WELLBEING OF ETHNIC WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS (CHT)	301
STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS FOR THE POOR	37,025
STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY & PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS TO ADDRESS COMBATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND BUILD COMMUNITY RESILIENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE	27,761
TOTAL	8,967,237

MJF has weathered multiple challenges in its journey of improving governance and local institutions. International aid is usually tied to the quantifiable results in terms of the number of beneficiaries and the number of interventions undertaken, and MJF has worked hard to change this approach and show donors that empowering civil society and working on human rights takes substantially more than merely spending the funds effectively. Through continuous advocacy and activism to challenge the status quo, which was often met with fierce resistance and political interference, MJF has continued its struggle and maintained its integrity.

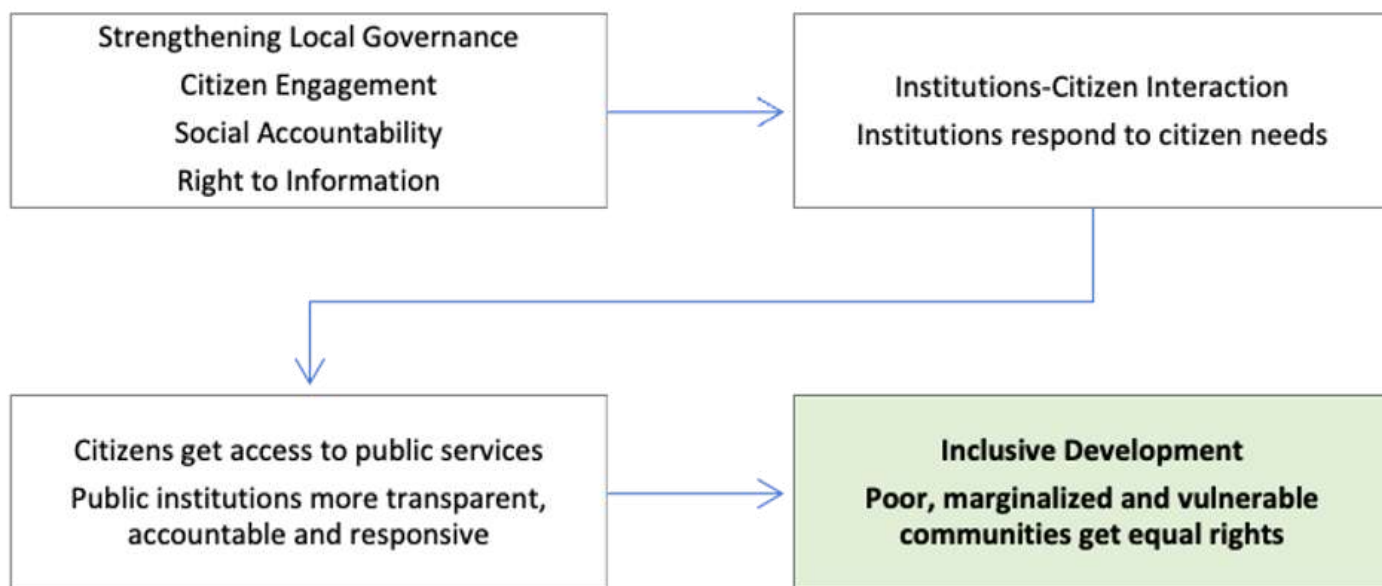
For MJF, strengthening public institutions encompasses a wide variety of initiatives that are at the core of overcoming underdevelopment. These include enforcing laws such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act, for which MJF played a pivotal role; improving public administration for the inclusion of vulnerable and excluded groups such as women, children, the disabled, and coastal communities; provision of public services, such as equitable distribution of social safety benefits, access to health facilities, and clean water; enrollment of children in schools; and empowering subsistence agriculture communities by ensuring fair prices for purchasing crop inputs and selling their produce. MJF does not just empower the local communities at basic administrative levels, such as Union Parishads and Upazila, but also distinguishes itself prominently by including government officials and service providers in its programming. This is because it believes that without directly working with and training those responsible for providing public services, pro-poor policies cannot be enacted and implemented.

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Use of Right to Information Act	Community Score Card	Citizen Report Card
Perception Surveys	Social Audit	Social Mapping
Semi-structured Interviews	Field Verification	Public Hearings
Activation of Institutional committees	Open Budget Meeting (OBM)	Community planning (Ward-Shava)



MJF's approach recognizes that change does not occur from focusing on the local level alone— it is necessary to work at all levels of government in order to create sustainable change. MJF works to link local institutional reform to national and global levels of reform, and back again. By creating these linkages, MJF is able to successfully implement actions that foster accountable and responsive governance.

Through guiding community empowerment, forming citizen support groups, implementing institutional capacity building, facilitating participatory planning, assisting community monitoring, and forming institutional committees, among other activities, MJF works to reform public institutions to be more engaging, transparent, efficient, and accountable to those they serve. MJF's key areas of focus include policy advocacy, participatory planning, citizen engagement, promoting social accountability, and governance performance.

In order to achieve these results, MJF partner organizations work with service provider institutions responsible for providing basic services such as primary health care, agriculture, primary education, social security, water-sanitation, and both local and national governance institutions as drivers of change to reform their institutional processes. MJF works to achieve the adoption of public institution participatory planning, public institutions disseminating service and procedural information, citizens participating in institutional procedures, institutions responding to citizen queries and needs, and citizen grievances being resolved at the institutional level. Beyond that, MJF aims to change the overall culture, where citizens are viewed as associates and not recipients, and where citizens from poor and marginalized communities emerge as leaders.

The success of this work depends on consistent government support for governance reforms, continued decentralization and political stability, and open civil society space. Only then can citizens access more resources, services, and opportunities. This will allow service delivery agencies to become more transparent, accountable, and responsive to the people. This will eventually lead to poor, marginalized, and vulnerable communities and people who enjoy a better quality of life through a well-governed environment.

NATIONAL ADVOCACY FORUMS

MJF places a heavy emphasis on working directly with government institutions to achieve these desired impacts. By working directly with government institutions, MJF motivates the implementation of participatory processes with the support of their partner organizations. At the same time, MJF promotes the sustainability of outcomes and institutions by creating linkages and platforms to negotiate with the government at the policy level. MJF, collaborating with the Bangladeshi government and other partner organizations, supports three national advocacy platforms: the Right to Information Forum (RTIF), the Governance Advocacy Forum (GAF), and the National Forum for Social Protection (NFSP).

In 2008, MJF helped establish the RTIF, a coalition of institutions and individuals who work together to ensure effective implementation and promotion of the right to information of the people of Bangladesh. In 2009, MJF and the RTIF played an important role in passing the Right to Information Act (RTI), which ensures the free flow of information to citizens, allowing citizens to seek information from authorities. This was an extremely important step in ensuring transparency and accountability in public institutions, and an integral part of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and expression recognized by the Bangladeshi Constitution as a fundamental right. Today, MJF continues to facilitate the RTIF, which raises public awareness of the provision of the Act, implements capacity building on both the demand and supply side in compliance with the Act to ensure people's right to information, and works to mainstream the right to information in all development agendas and efforts.

Established in 2007, the GAF is a national-level platform established in 2007 that consists of 36 national and international non-governmental organizations, networks, local government

platforms, concerned institutions, and civil society representatives. The forum aims to promote democratic decentralization and strong local government through policy advocacy.

The NFSP, launched in 2015 and implemented by MJF, monitors the effectiveness and impact of social safety on the beneficiaries of the government projects of social protection for the poor. The forum receives feedback on the effectiveness of the government projects directly from the poor and marginalized communities, who are the beneficiaries of the different social protection schemes.



SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS IN ACTION

Beyond national forums, MJF employs many different social accountability tools, including public hearings, face-the-public meetings, citizen charters, and grievance redressal systems to build community-based organizations' capacity to motivate public institutions to monitor and assess quality services received by indigenous peoples. Through the use of social audits, MJF and their partner organization Khulna Mukti Seba Sangstha were able to identify multiple issues with the Khalsibunia and Shiyalidanga Community Clinics. The identified problems included the lack of fans in clinics, which caused problems for both patients and employees, especially during the summer; patients were forced to pay for blood pressure checkups; there was no breastfeeding corner for mothers; and mandatory monthly meetings were not held regularly. Because these problems were identified by a social audit, the Upazila Health and Family Planning Officer provided fans for the community clinics, breastfeeding corners were established, patients no longer needed to pay for blood pressure checkups, and regular monthly meetings were organized. MJF and its partner organizations have helped achieve thousands of similar results by using social accountability strategies at multiple levels of the system.

Social accountability processes, transparency, and access to information are effective tools to ensure marginalized communities receive their entitlements and create an interactive relationship among citizens, government officials, and local government representatives. MJF's recent experience demonstrates that citizen engagement can play a vital role to make public institutions more accountable, transparent, and effective. In 2021 alone, 1,093 citizen committees were formed to monitor health, agricultural extension, social protection, and services available to the poor. Additionally, 340 government service delivery outlets, including agricultural extension offices, health facilities, social safety net programs, and schools were monitored by citizen committees. The following five projects, implemented by MJF and its partners, highlight the vital role of citizen engagement in strengthening public institutions.

RIGHTS AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGE FUND (RGCF)

MJF managed the Rights and Governance Challenge Fund (RGCF), supported by DFID, and empowered millions of vulnerable women, children, workers, and marginalized social groups. MJF's overarching goal via RGCF was to ensure these social actors were capable of demanding their rights. The grantees chosen by MJF under RGCF focused on initiatives that sought to improve the environment for marginalized citizens through legislative changes, civil society associations, and access to information on rights. This led to improved responsiveness of both the government and the private sector.

The wide-ranging activities implemented under RGCF benefitted more than 7.5 million people and involved:

- Helping poor and vulnerable people to understand and articulate their rights and prevent their rights' violations.
- Improving security, justice, and medical care facilities for targeted women and their families.
- Ensuring increased wages and better working conditions for employees in various sectors, such as textile.
- Increased income and improved access to resources and public services for the most vulnerable and socially excluded.
- Reduction in child labor, increased awareness of children rights and protection.
- Increasing MJF partners' representation in government committees and task forces on human rights and governance issues.
- Influencing and enacting laws and regulations to ensure the rights and entitlements of the poor and marginalized.

THE CITIZEN ACTION FOR RESULTS, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY (CARTA) PROGRAM

Funded by the Japanese Social Development Fund and implemented between 2011 and 2015, CARTA enhanced the development, impact, sustainability, and local ownership of five selected projects financed by the World Bank in Bangladesh. The project aimed to increase awareness within beneficiary groups of public services, resources, and grievance mechanisms available through the World Bank projects; establish constructive engagement between beneficiary groups, civil society organizations, and agencies representing World Bank projects; and improve skills of communities to measure and/or carry out monitoring effectiveness of selected components of the World Bank projects. Third-Party Monitoring (TPM), a process of involving communities in monitoring the implementation and results of a public project, was the main strategy employed in this project. TPM can obtain a complete sense of project performance, eliciting quantitative and qualitative feedback directly from beneficiaries and improving the quality of services. Key lessons on the impact of TPM, learned through first-hand experience implementing CARTA, include: increasing project effectiveness of targeting public services to specific beneficiary groups; empowering communities who can bring their voices to the forefront of project implementation discussions; and positively influencing budgeting processes and internal governance and accountability of local-level institutions.

THE CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE POOR AND EXCLUDED (COPE) PROJECT

Funded by DFID between 2013 and 2017, the COPE Project worked with people who are excluded and marginalized in society due to their ethnicity, occupation, caste, or gender to make these communities aware of their rights and to provide advice, advocacy, support, and organization to empower them to claim those rights. The program focused on those who are often denied services and opportunities, and those who have the least representation in society, including individuals with disabilities, poor and marginalized communities, women, Dalits, religious and ethnic minorities, and child laborers. The program empowered the poor and socially excluded, with a particular focus on women and girls, by enabling them to access basic public services and participate in economic development, as well as achieving a greater say in decisions affecting their lives. Over the life of the project, there were 690,291 beneficiaries. Received benefits include access to social safety net programs and other public services, legal aid support, health support, increased land access through the enforcement of land and property rights, and rehabilitation for child laborers who experienced poor working conditions.

THE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT BUDGETARY ACCOUNTABILITY (SEBA) PROJECT

Supported by the World Bank-managed Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) between 2014 and 2017, SEBA aimed to make schemes implemented by Union Parishads (UPs) more effective, timely, and compliant with environmental and social frameworks while being responsive to community needs. The project was implemented in 45 Union Parishads in five districts, a population of approximately 1.65 million, in partnership with five different local NGOs. Specific objectives of the project included: increasing budget transparency of Union Parishads by ensuring the free flow of information; making Union Parishads representatives more accountable to their communities; and ensuring more inclusive planning and budgeting by Union Parishads through greater participation, especially of women, poor, and marginalized groups. As a result of the SEBA project, communities were empowered and the quality, accountability, and transparency of services provided by Union Parishads improved.

The project ensured proactive information disclosure and transparency through a variety of means including notice boards, booklets, courtyard meetings, leaflets, and other activities. The percentage of community members who perceived information being disclosed proactively increased from 21% before the project to 74% after the intervention. This included a rise from 6% to 68% for women and 13% to 70% for men. Another impact of the SEBA project was increased accountability of the UP bodies. Community members now have the ability to have their voices heard and state their needs and demands. The percentage of community members who perceived ensured accountability of Union Parishads increased from 18% before the SEBA intervention to 84%. This included a rise from 10% to 83% for women and 12% to 80% for men. Finally, SEBA ensured the participation of community members in UP activities, and community members have the space to express the extent of their

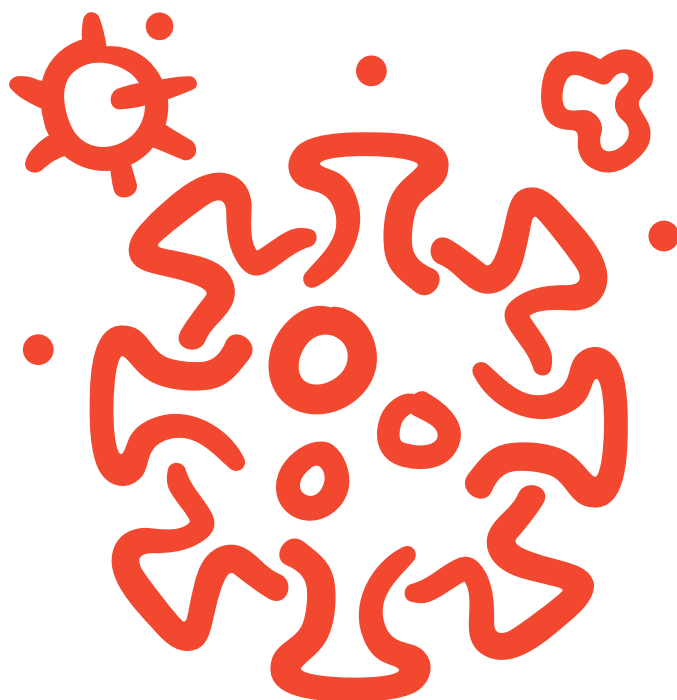
satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the performance of the Union Parishads. The percentage of community members who perceived higher participation in the Union Parishads increased from 11% before SEBA to 77% afterward.

THE EXCLUDED PEOPLE'S RIGHTS (EPR) PROGRAM

Starting in 2018, in partnership with the Wave Foundation, ERP works on behalf of marginalized communities to make local government and service delivery institutions more accountable and responsive, and directly improve marginalized communities' access to public goods and services. The project aims to identify the constraints and opportunities in the existing local government legislations and practices on the ground; understand the challenges of localization and implementation of SDGs and the goals of the 8FYP of Bangladesh in achieving development milestones; and examine the current status of local resource mobilization by LGIs and suggest ways forward on this front. Beyond that, the project also assesses the current status of people's participation, including the participation of women in the affairs of local government institutions; explores the current accountability system implemented at the local level; and provides recommendations as to how the local government system can be made more effective in Bangladesh. By the end of the project in 2023, MJF expects that 105,400 excluded, poor, and marginalized people will receive the social safety net; 118,400 poor, marginalized people will receive access to health services from local primary health care institutions; 48,500 poor women will receive access to safe drinking water; 24,750 poor women will receive access to agricultural services; 9,975 marginalized men and women will receive opportunities for skills development and become involved with income-generating activities, and 6,000 children of disadvantaged families will be enrolled in primary schools.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PROGRAMMING

In 2020 and 2021, implementing activities to address weak local governance institutions was very difficult due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. As a response to the pandemic, the UK Government reduced its Official Development Assistance, cutting MJF's funding in half. As a result, MJF discontinued both its Youth and Social Cohesion and Decent Work programming, and the funding cut had a direct impact on its SPI programming. Beyond funding cuts, COVID-19 affected the ability of citizens to access the public services they required and created a host of other new challenges.



Due to the restricted mobility caused by COVID-19, the MJF team and partner organizations developed alternative strategies for facilitating community mobilization, social accountability, and local advocacy activities. By being flexible and creative, the SPI team continued to assist project progress despite the prolonged COVID-19 situation. MJF employed virtual meetings and monitoring to retain partners' work spirit and share accurate information. Additionally, to support poor and marginalized communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, MJF was able to provide emergency cash support to targeted beneficiaries through data they had from a socio-economic household survey and poverty mapping analysis.

An important lesson that MJF learned throughout the COVID-19 pandemic is that the timely change in the approaches and strategies for facilitating social accountability and greater use of digital technology can minimize public service deprivation due to other, potential pandemic situations similar to COVID-19.

LESSONS LEARNED, CHALLENGES, AND SUCCESSES

CIVIC SPACE

MJF's approach to building accountable and responsive public institutions depends on continued government support for governance reform, including bolstering citizen participation in local governance and accountability feedback mechanisms, as well as open civic space. In recent years, civic space has been shrinking at the national level,[27] and civil society groups that are critical of the national government face censorship, criminalization, or delays or stoppages of their access to funding. At the local level, however, there remains considerable space for civil society to work cooperatively with the government. MJF continues to advocate for national level policy reforms, but there are limits on what it is possible to achieve in the present political climate. Nevertheless, there is wide recognition within Bangladesh that the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) hinges on the quality of public institutions in Bangladesh. This means that MJF continues to find space in which to work successfully and to continue to support citizen efforts to strengthen their public institutions.

COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

MJF has learned that it is essential to work with both government and citizen groups to build relationships and trust so that official mechanisms of accountability can be activated by empowered civic actors. Partner organizations have learned that it is necessary to both build citizen demand for local government and service delivery institutions that work, and to strengthen government capacities to respond to citizens' claims and expectations. This requires considerable coordination, the skill of experienced facilitators familiar with both citizens' lives, and knowledge of the challenges and limitations of the administration and local authorities.

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGIES WORK—BUT THEY TAKE TIME

The Foundation has also worked extensively to improve local governance structure, equitable budget allocation, and inclusivity in public institutions through social accountability tools such as citizen monitoring, social audits, and community score cards. This section of the report has highlighted some of the achievements and impacts of these strategies, but they reveal little of the hard work that is behind them. A key lesson over the last 20 years has been that reforming service delivery institutions and the training of staff and citizens in implementing social accountability tools to build more accountable and responsive governance must be iterative processes involving trial-and-error, learning, and feedback. These are not one-off exercises or short-term projects.

TACKLING MARGINALIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION



A temporary homestay of slum people at Dhaka city area

KEY MESSAGES:

- MJF's partner organizations tackle some of the most entrenched forms of marginalization and vulnerability, for people experiencing discrimination, exclusion, or violence on grounds of ethnicity, caste, gender, or occupation
- Extreme poverty and discrimination intersect in complex ways to disempower people: MJF's partner human rights groups and social movements take a long-term approach to empowerment that builds people's collective strength to combat injustice.
- Empowered people need capable governments; MJF works closely with state actors to build their capacities to respond to the needs and demands of marginalized citizens.
- MJF understands that changing cultural views on marginalized communities is a daunting task, and their partners work with government institutions to change and enforce laws designed to protect the marginalized.

MARGINALIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION IN BANGLADESH

Manusher Jonno Foundation believes that marginalization is linked to exclusion, deprivation, inequality, and vulnerability that socially, economically, and politically disenfranchises a community. MJF's project portfolio implicitly targets these issues within marginalized groups and has been working to combat them for decades. The social exclusion of the marginalized in the Bangladeshi context has kept the organization busy advocating and supporting the enfranchisement and extension of equal rights for 16-17 communities. There are at least 30 million marginalized people in Bangladesh,[28] roughly 4/5 the size of Canada's total population, and their status is due to a myriad of factors relating to societal discrimination on the grounds of their occupation, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or disability. Discrimination against the marginalized amounts to economic and cultural exclusion or adverse incorporation where communities are essentially held captive by the majority in constrained economic, political, environmental, and social relationships.

People experiencing marginalization and discrimination exist across Bangladesh and have a long history of facing humiliation and oppression. Their demands are often ignored by policy-makers, politicians, and even by the mainstream population. Generally, the marginalized and excluded population includes destitute women and children, low occupational groups (weavers, sex workers, traditional fishermen, small land farmers, landless, boatmen, blacksmiths, river gypsies, cobblers/shoemakers, pig rearers, cleaners/sweepers, etc.), minorities (ethnic, religious, sexual), people living in isolated/remote areas (Char/Haor/hill/forest), the disabled, the elderly, different sexual orientations & gender identities (SOGI), and the poorest of the poor.



THE DALIT COMMUNITY

The Dalit community is among the most economically marginalized and socially excluded groups in Bangladesh. These communities are found throughout South Asia, and their marginalization within Bangladesh is due to the socio-occupational status they hold in society as members of a group considered to be of low caste. It is estimated that there are 5.5 million Dalits living in 63 districts in Bangladesh.[29] Dalits contribute to the socio-economic development of the country and are involved in professions which are considered low, impure, and filthy, such as sweeping, sewerage cleaning, pig rearing, burying dead bodies, shoe and leather work, drum beating, laundering clothes (Dhopa), etc. MJF working experience reveals that people treat these communities as untouchables, and they constantly suffer neglect, disgrace, torture, discrimination, humiliation, and deprivation. It is common practice to prohibit them from entering restaurants, salons, schools, hospitals, government offices, cinema halls, markets, and public functions in their locality. Dalits' traditional occupations are also under stress due to unfavorable policies of the government, bureaucratic hassles, non-cooperation of concerned authorities, and social isolation, further aggravating the sufferings of this vulnerable group.



FISHERFOLK

One subset of the Dalit are a collection of traditional fisherfolk communities that live along rivers and in coastal areas. This particular group makes up the largest component of MJF's work with marginalized communities, and it is estimated that around 18 million (11% of the total population) people in Bangladesh are engaged on a full or part-time basis in the fishery sector.[30] Fisheries contribute 3.69% to the country's GDP and 23% to agricultural GDP.[31] Not all who engage in fishing are marginalized, but a large number are due to religion, caste, and lack of alternative means of income. Marginalized fisherfolk groups have limited access to public water-bodies,

inadequate alternative livelihood support outside of fishing seasons, political impediment/power barriers to participating in the leasing processes, and lack the financial resources to lease the water-bodies where they fish. Improper management of water resources, such as surface water policies that adversely impact the livelihoods of Fisherfolk communities, represent a large hurdle for this group to overcome. Moreover, land grabbing activities by the mainstream population contribute further to the deterioration of water resources in the country.

HARIJAN

The Harijan are a community of cleaners that can be described as a Dalit subsection; they are essentially a marginalized group within the marginalized. They are treated as 'Sudra' (lowest caste) by the traditional society. Harijan means "People of God," and the name was given to them by Mahatma Gandhi to encourage others to refer to them in a dignified manner since their former name derogatorily referred to them as sweepers. In mainstream society, they are not allowed to enter any hotel to eat food or to have tea in the same cups used by other people of the general class. They are not allowed to rent houses beyond their community or access religious infrastructure such as temples, and they face discrimination in employment, wages, and social and political participation. Harijan families are functionally landless and many live from hand to mouth in destitution. All members of a Harijan family live in one-room government constructed housing projects. Their livelihood options are cleaning toilets, sweeping streets, emptying the septic tanks, and similar low-status and stigmatized jobs. Despite efforts by MJF to raise their social status, they are looked down upon within Bangladeshi society. The practice of early marriage in their society hinders Harijan adolescent boys and girls from furthering themselves educationally or economically. MJF is extremely keen to address the issues of this community and works with Harijan organizations to apply pressure on the government to adhere to legislative provisions that guarantee government jobs for members of the Harijan community.

ADIBASHI (INDIGENOUS PEOPLES)

Bangladesh is home to around 3 million indigenous peoples from more than 50 ethnic backgrounds. The Constitution of Bangladesh does not recognize ethnic and cultural minorities as indigenous people, although these communities prefer to be known as 'indigenous peoples' in English and as "Adibashi" in Bangla. Two distinct communities exist and are referred to as Hill and Plains Adibashi, and they each experience varying levels of discrimination from the majority population. One MJF report noted that 28% of the Hill Adibashi had experienced violence at the hands of the Bengali settler majority, and as many as 40% of Plains Adibashi people had encountered similar situations.[32] Ethnic minorities in Bangladesh often face harassment and violence at the hands of both Bengali settlers encroaching on their traditional homelands as well as military personnel stationed in areas such as the CHT (Chittagong Hill Tracts). It is not uncommon for individuals from ethnic minority groups to be arbitrarily arrested and beaten up by the military and military-backed reformist groups. Land grabbing by powerful individuals of the mainstream population continues to adversely impact indigenous people. Due to land dispute issues, the indigenous people of the plains and their networks have been demanding separate land commissions from the mainstream Bangladeshi community to formalize their control over lands they have traditionally inhabited and stave off land grabbing by powerful actors and groups.

MARGINAL LANDLESS

In Bangladesh, more than 80% of people live in villages and 80% of this population depend on agriculture for their lives and livelihoods.[33] The majority of these agri-dependent people are farmers. However, most of these farmers do not have land for agricultural work. These people are called 'landless' and estimated at about 10 million families. As per the government's definition, landless are those farmers who have 10 decimals or less of land (100 decimals is one acre). In the arena of land ownership, the disparity is very high between rich and poor, or more specifically, between powerful and powerless. Agricultural lands of the marginal farmers are gradually being bought up or grabbed by rich and powerful landowners. In most cases, the rich owners convert the agricultural lands for industrial or business purposes. At present, the agricultural land is shrinking by 1% per year.[34]

Statistics show that at present 22% of rural agri-dependent families are landless,[35] meaning they have no land at all. In terms of absolute numbers of persons, the landless people have increased threefold in the last four decades.[36] One of the main reasons for landlessness is that day-by-day the agricultural land is going into the hands of the elites who are not farmers and do not live in the villages but keep a huge amount of land under their control in the big cities. Therefore, a large number of landless people are forced to migrate to the big cities for alternative employment.

Landless people are entitled to have access to Khas land (government-owned land) and water-bodies for their lives and livelihoods. Unfortunately, most of the Khas land and water-bodies are illegally occupied by powerful people. Under government jurisdiction there exists more than 5 million acres of Khas land[37] and water-bodies which, if distributed among about 10 million landless families, will drastically result in reducing food shortage and poverty in Bangladesh.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Promoting and protecting the rights of people with disabilities is a longstanding goal of MJF, although disabilities are not traditionally considered to be a matter of development. According to the Household Income & Expenditure Survey (HIES) conducted by the Bureau of Statistics in 2010, the prevalence of disability was recorded at 9%, meaning more than 15 million people are disabled in Bangladesh, although other estimates indicate a higher figure of around 15% of the total population, as per the World Bank/WHO.[38] Discrimination in the family, in the community, and at the workplace is widespread as part of the violation of rights of people with disabilities in Bangladesh. MJF experience confirms that the stigma on disability still exists in society and affects access to care, employment, health services, and education. Despite strong legislation, inadequate support for implementation of the law is the key barrier to address the issues of people with disabilities.

OTHER MARGINALIZED GROUPS

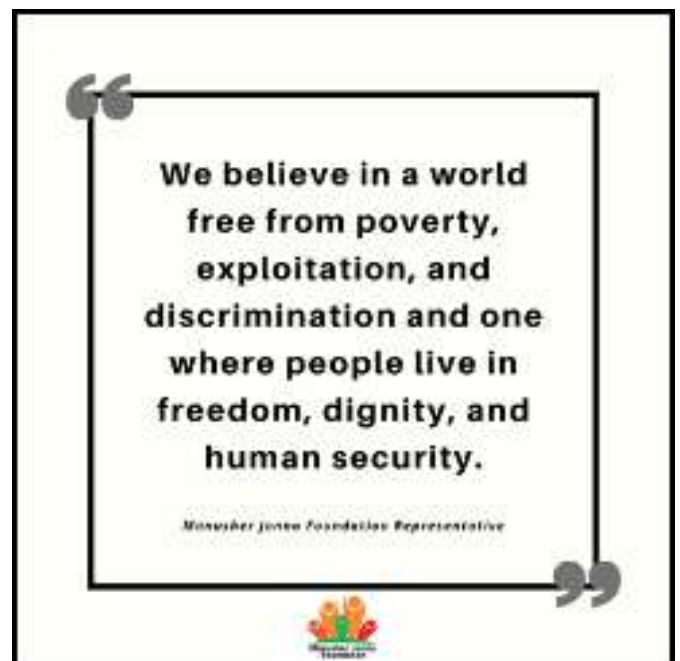
Other marginalized groups within the MJF portfolio include sex workers, religious minority groups, and women who all uniquely face discrimination challenges. Women are often doubly marginalized due to their gender intersecting with other marginalized identities such as ethnic or religious minority status, or being part of a stigmatized occupation. Awareness of the complexity of these challenges allows MJF to address the state, economic actors, and Bangladeshi society as a whole in a way that advocates for the inclusion of the marginalized in ways that incorporate each respective community into mainstream society on fair and equitable terms. MJF marginalization programming seeks to encourage market linkages between financial institutions and marginalized groups; ensure the Bangladeshi state adheres to "Leave No One Behind" Sustainable Development Goals, and encourage speaking out against marginalization from all subsets of Bangladeshi society.

MJF'S APPROACH TO TACKLING MARGINALIZATION

MJF has been working to tackle marginalization and promote the human rights of the marginalized for many years. People from marginalized groups face violations of their most basic human needs, such as food and property. MJF works with these groups to take back their own agency in claiming needed services, as well as promoting and seeking to implement good governance practices. In an attempt to adequately assist people from groups that are commonly discriminated against in Bangladesh, MJF has conducted research and has connected with women in various professional groups in order to discover where gaps exist in the workforce, causing women to not have the same access to rights or assistance on the basis of their gender. MJF has used this information to assist in the development of a plan for gender equity in their work. This is particularly important in their work with communities where women are actively discriminated against in the professional sphere, such as within the fisherfolk's community.

The fundamental task of this kind of work is to activate both the 'supply side' and the 'demand side' of services for marginalized communities. On the supply side, MJF partner organizations put pressure on those who are mandated to provide services to marginalized groups. Through consistently insisting that marginalized groups must be able to participate in services such as health, education, safety nets, and disability allowances, the goal is that the government will become obligated to provide these services without being asked. One example of this kind of pursuit of change is MJF's work with indigenous landless women of both mainstream and indigenous communities. Though these women have ancestral ownership of their land, this ownership is not documented in a way that is legally recognized, and thus it is common for politically powerful elites to claim it as their own and force the indigenous farmers out, effectively putting their entire livelihood on the line. MJF, in order to advocate for this community, actively engages with government officials from the Land Ministry to create a Land Commission which, once accepted, will allow for easier mechanisms through which the indigenous community can reclaim their land.

The second avenue through which change is pursued is the demand side, which focuses on empowering marginalized communities to demand their rightful services. Many of those who are, and have historically been, deprived of basic human rights are not aware that their rights are being violated. MJF works with organizations led by members of these marginalized communities and which represent their concerns, to raise people's awareness of their rights and entitlements, and help them to claim what is rightfully theirs. This helps these marginalized people to form groups, which collectively can claim their rights from the service providers and government service institutions.



Through this forming of groups and organizations, or “institution building,” people are empowered to demand what they are owed. A single person acting alone has very little chance of inciting change, but a group together has significantly more power. By sharing information with one another, these groups can, as a collective, build their capacity for pursuing good governance practices and achieving change. 37,500 such groups have been formed to date by MJF’s marginalization team, comprising nearly 750,000 group members representing many marginalized communities.[39]

In particular, MJF’s marginalization team works to include women in their institution-building as much as possible. Based on the data collected in their gender audit, MJF found that less than 20% of Bangladeshi women are actively working and holding jobs, and this number is significantly less when these women also come from a marginalized group, such as women with disabilities.[40] Additionally, women are significantly underrepresented when it comes to individual production and ownership of property and products, as women are commonly seen solely as supporters of their husbands. Because of this, MJF makes significant efforts to include women in economic opportunities and lobbying efforts, including cooperatives of disabled women that have been formed, and are currently working to achieve government support in order to participate in income generation activities.

Advocating for these institution-building groups is one of the key elements of MJF’s programming. Through the pursuit of treaties and the implementation of policies, significant positive change has been achieved. MJF has caused and witnessed significant movement in this arena at both the grassroots level and at the national level, mobilizing civil society organizations to action. This collective force on social service providers creates significant pressure on the government, which has, and will continue to, bring about positive change.

CHALLENGES WITH POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

While MJF focuses on promoting rights and good governance, this focus does not come without challenges, such as improving policies within the country’s development initiatives. This approach focuses on improving the political economy of failed governance by addressing and working with the government directly. However, addressing the supply and demand sides of advocacy can only achieve so much—the rest hinges on the views of Bangladeshi citizens.

Equal rights for all remain an aspiration in Bangladesh, and unchecked, governance systems tend to exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities. Deep-rooted social beliefs often enable and inflame marginalization. As an MJF representative stated, “the pace in which it must be changed, this is not possible.”[41] Marginalized groups are often not welcome to participate in society, further perpetuating a vicious cycle of continually separating them in the minds of those who do participate in society. Without the support of those for whom society is built, marginalized groups will never be able to fully enjoy their rights and will be forced to continue living on the periphery of society.

SUCCESSES IN TACKLING MARGINALIZATION

Despite the serious and persistent challenges, MJF and their partner organizations have enjoyed considerable success in policy advocacy, especially regarding Dalit, Harijan, Adibashi, and disability rights, as well as broader policies of anti-discrimination.

ENSURING FISHING RIGHTS

Fisherfolk's rights are a priority for MJF, and they have had great success in advocacy for policies to promote the rights of this marginalized group. There are 10 million fisherfolk in Bangladesh, with the majority being open-water fisherfolk, and 1 million are women. Fishing areas in Bangladesh are controlled by public authorities with the power to decide who receives a 'Jele Card' (fishing permit). One of MJF's tactics has been to enroll marginalized fisherfolk in the Jele Card system so they receive official permission to fish. However, in order to fish, one must first form a cooperative. This process involves receiving a Jele Card, forming a group, and then going to a corporate officer to issue a fishing registration. By law, anyone can obtain Jele Cards, but women have historically had a much more difficult time securing a Jele Card or registering for cooperatives. In 2013, at the behest of MJF, the Prime Minister issued an order that anyone who is a real fisher will be allowed to receive the Jele Card. However, women were still prevented from forming a cooperative due to pre-conceived notions from the government regarding their fitness to perform the work. Luckily, the last few years have seen the formation of multiple women's fishing cooperatives—two in particular because of MJF's intervention.

EMPLOYMENT FOR THE HARIJAN COMMUNITY

MJF and its partner organizations from the Harijan community have had great success in creating new economic opportunities for a community that has historically been overlooked and sidelined. Municipal Corporations in Bangladesh have a provision that restricts cleaning jobs to the Harijan community, in recognition of the historical discrimination they have experienced. However, mainstream society will often try to obtain these comparatively secure and well-paid government jobs using political ties, thus leaving the Harijan community with fewer job opportunities. To combat this, MJF creates pressure through advocacy and lobbying on the relevant political figures and policymakers to ensure that the provision is upheld and enforced. The Harijan community's national-level platform has partnered with MJF to raise their voices by facilitating pressure on the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Co-operatives. MJF has written to and negotiated with this Ministry through workshops, seminars, and media campaigns to guarantee the Harijan community was not ignored. This advocacy resulted in the Prime Minister issuing a directive declaring that provisions that guarantee government cleaning jobs for Harijin communities would be followed.

ADIBASHI LAND RIGHTS

Working with partner organizations on Adibashi land rights, MJF is keen on assisting the Adibashi reclaim their ancestral lands by helping the communities to form land commissions, which must be approved by the Ministry of Land. These land commissions can then work to regain the land they have lost. The Adibashi can further use this institution building to fight for more representation and financial incentives for their communities, such as creating a provision that would allocate a certain number of government jobs to the Adibashi people and increasing the government financial allocation given to their community.

TACKLING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

In 2013, the Tackling Marginalization and Discrimination team at MJF targeted and suggested reforms of Bangladesh's disability law and Disability National Action Plan, both of which the government approved. In 2017, the MJF team was instrumental in formulating disability rules for effective implementation of the disability law. Additionally, MJF has championed the ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty of 2016, which encourages the free exchange of accessible-format materials for people who are blind, visually impaired, and print disabled. In 2021, MJF submitted a report that showed that official documents are not accessible for those with disabilities, arguing that the government has a responsibility to provide accessible documentations. MJF has lobbied to get this law passed, and it is currently being negotiated with the government. Their goal for 2022 is to help pass a law allowing companies to get a tax rebate for employing disabled persons.

ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LAW

MJF's lobbying has also paid off in the form of an Anti-Discrimination Bill being accepted by the government in January 2022, which will be presented to Parliament. The Bill is an instrument to address "untouchability" at the local level, thus ensuring equal access to health services, education, and other forms of employment. While it was originally meant for the Dalit and Harijan communities, it was later expanded to include protections for all marginalized communities, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, or marital status. The hope is that the Bill will aid in reducing, and eventually eliminating, a disparaging society so that marginalized communities will not be discriminated against.



LOOKING FORWARD

MJF has had tremendous success in advocating for marginalized communities since its inception in 2002. Their foundational work, passion for equality, and track record with policymakers makes them well-suited to bring groundbreaking, lasting change to marginalized communities throughout Bangladesh. Looking forward, MJF's biggest challenge will be to change how mainstream Bangladeshi citizens view marginalized communities. Government advocacy can only accomplish so much. In order to create a truly inclusive society, MJF tries to find ways to change the hearts and minds of citizens for whom society already caters so that space can be created for those who traditionally have not belonged. Moreover, each respective marginalized group offers an opportunity for cooperation between themselves in a way that fosters true allyship. These linkages between marginalized groups are key to ensuring "Leave No One Behind" Sustainable Development Goals can be met for all without diminishing the peoplehood autonomy and self determination sought by all marginalized communities. Monumental change can occur when society works together to be inclusive, and MJF has the knowledge and capacity to facilitate this change.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Key Messages:

- MJF's programs attempt to dismantle the deep-rooted patriarchy embedded in Bangladesh's society through the inclusion of men and boys in the collective fight for gender equality.
- When women are equipped with leadership skills and self-confidence, they are empowered to join collective action and speak up against discrimination and violence.
- MJF acts as catalysts in advocacy through the partnership with policymakers in the legal sphere and civil society organizations to create critical laws that protect women and girls.
- To eliminate systemic discrimination and barriers ingrained in services providing institutions, MJF liaises training sessions for healthcare workers and police officers to ensure victims, and survivors, receive the protection, care, and support they deserve.

THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh suffers from extremely high levels of violence against women and girls (VAWG), including intimate partner violence, harassment and violence in public spaces and at work, and the chronic problem of child marriage. Civil society groups such as MJF have been working with women's rights organizations to implement programs that aim to tackle the root causes of VAWG; these organizations' programs attempt to build women's collective organizational strength, change deep-rooted patriarchal norms, empower girls and women with their education and leadership skills, guide service providers on how to respond to domestic violence victims, and advocate for women's rights and security at both local and national levels. Over the past 20 years, MJF and their partner organizations have learned that the power of altering gender norms and instilling confidence in women and young girls has the biggest impact when combating VAWG.

THE POWER OF ALTERING GENDER NORMS AND INSTILLING CONFIDENCE IN WOMEN AND YOUNG GIRLS HAS THE BIGGEST IMPACT WHEN COMBATING VAWG.

70%

**OF WOMEN IN BANGLADESH
HAVE FACED SOME FORM OF
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

Historically, women and girls in Bangladesh have experienced gender discrimination and sexual harassment in various capacities, both in-home and within public spheres. Although positive strides toward gender equality have occurred over the years, issues of domestic violence, child marriage, workplace discrimination, and public harassment remain rampant in society.[42] The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated violence against women and girls in Bangladesh. Over 70% of women in Bangladesh have faced some form of intimate partner violence.[43] Although illegal, the common practice of a bride's family providing dowries to their husbands exposes women to domestic violence, as husbands and in-laws frequently attack and even kill wives whose families cannot pay. Women who have more education and make a visible material contribution to family income tend to experience less domestic violence. These factors work together to empower women to speak out against violence and report abuses, both in society and at home. Yet, this can also lead to further violence escalation, given Bangladesh's societal and institutional patriarchy.

Bangladesh has the fourth-highest rate of child marriages in the world. Child marriage takes away the rights of young girls and leads to other concerns, such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and increases maternal mortality rates. Although laws and policies have been put into place to help with issues of child marriage, societal preferences take precedence in many societies, especially in rural areas. According to studies conducted by MJF, most child marriages throughout the pandemic have been held with the full consent of the young bride's parents, who hope to save the costs of their child's upkeep, and by marrying them off young they often pay a smaller dowry (as men and their families prefer very young girls as brides). Husbands and in-laws are often found to have tortured child brides to force them into extracting further payments from their parents or to provide domestic labor. Combating VAWG in Bangladesh is paramount to its development and growth as a country.

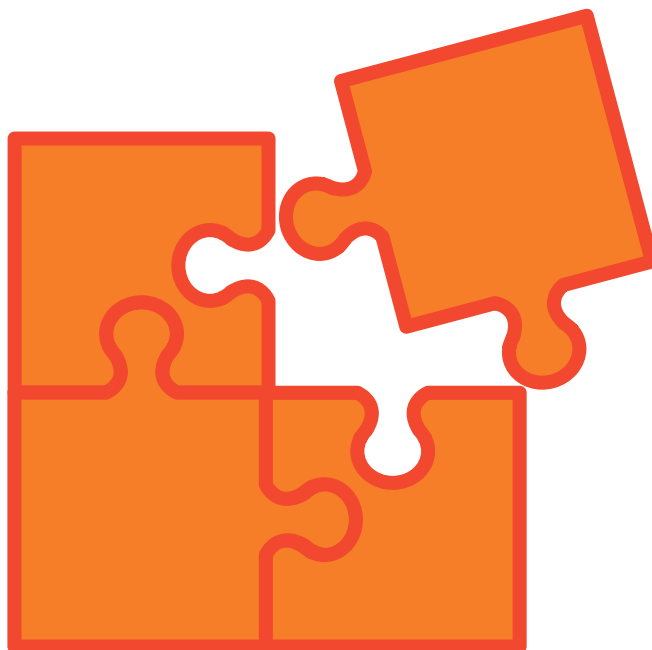
Women in Bangladesh are joining the workforce in larger numbers than ever before, thus contributing to women's empowerment and protection through income generation. However, the workplace also fosters a space conducive for gender discrimination and harassment. The garment factory industry is largely comprised of immigrant women from rural areas of Bangladesh. Women make less than half the amount that men are compensated for and do not have access to the same labor rights that men receive. As a result, women receive little to no days off from work and work without adequate labor protections and security.

Women and young girls also face an increased risk of public harassment, sexual harassment, and rape. Women and girls face these threats whilst walking on the street, participating in school, and utilizing public transportation. There is a deep-rooted fear of the police force due to the police's history of corruption and abuse towards women.



MJF'S APPROACH TO COMBATING VAWG

To combat VAWG, MJF envisions communities that empower women and young girls to use their voices to stand up in collective action against a historically patriarchal and male-dominated society. They aim to instill courage in women and girls through unity and group formation to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and discrimination. Although gender norms and cultural beliefs are deeply established in Bangladesh, MJF has found that there is strong evidence for evolution and change through education, awareness, and economic development. Working together with the Bangladeshi government and various NGOs, MJF implements programs that provide services and resources to victims of gender-based violence. Many of these programs aim to build leadership skills in women and girls so that they can organize against violence and discrimination. Additionally, MJF pursues equality and safety for women within the workforce so that they may contribute to family income and prosperity that further protect them from domestic violence. Other aspirations for women and young girls in the country include leadership development, inclusivity in solutions, and opportunities to amplify their voices to all levels of advocacy. This philosophy has guided MJF through the past 20 years and has offered prosperous solutions and encouraging statistics.



PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES

MJF has a demonstrated history in combating VAWG since 2003 with grants from UK Aid, which support MJF's Excluded People's Rights (EPR) project. Under the EPR project, MJF's partner organizations implement programs that aim to increase awareness regarding child marriage, engage men and boys in calls for gender equality, liaise with service providers on how to provide aid to domestic abuse victims, and undertake advocacy related tasks. From 2017 to 2022, MJF's partner organizations have implemented programs using aid from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). In 2019, MJF launched the Women's Voice and Leadership Bangladesh Project (WVLP), funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC), which aims to strengthen women's rights organizations and partner organizations at the local level.

SUPPORTING PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

One of MJF's most ambitious projects—Security and Rights of Women and Girls (SRWG)—is currently working with 13 partner organizations and eight sub-partner organizations across 22 districts in Bangladesh. In addition to financial and strategic support for program implementation, MJF provides programmatic support and capacity building initiatives for the partner organizations. The partner organizations utilize a variety of strategies to address issues of women's security and rights. A few key strategies include strategies in local communities, liaising with service providers, and advocacy at the national level.

Partner organizations conduct grassroots-level engagement to provide spaces for affected women and girls, as well as men and boys, to engage in discourse. MJF states that in order to tackle the root causes of VAWG, deep-rooted patriarchy must be removed. Therefore, partner organizations and social support groups organize workshops specific for men and boys. Partner organizations also undertake household visits to educate family members on the importance of preventing gender-based violence and encouraging girls to continue their education. Moreover, partner organizations provide training on generating income for women economic leverage and, in turn, increasing participation in the family's decision-making processes. At the local level, partner organizations also engage with women beneficiaries to help build leadership skills and encourage them to participate in local government committees.

LIAISING WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

Partner organizations conduct sessions with service providers from healthcare facilities, police stations, the Department of Women Affairs, and local government offices to provide training on how to adequately serve abused women and girls seeking their services. Each village where partner organizations operate holds different “day observations,” which act as dialogue sessions between partner organizations’ staff, beneficiaries, and service providers. These dialogue sessions provide an opportunity for rapport building between the beneficiaries and the service providers, which in turn helps build the beneficiaries’ trust in the service providers. To ensure long-term effectiveness of these dialogue sessions, partner organizations collect information from victims who report to each service provider that has attended a dialogue session.



NATIONAL-LEVEL ADVOCACY

MJF advocates for women’s rights and security at the national level by consulting with activists, lawyers, and policymakers. One of MJF’s most contributory achievements was advocating for the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act. According to the UN, the Act articulated the conditions that constitute as domestic violence (i.e., physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, or economic abuse) against women and children by any other family member. It also lists the duties and responsibilities of police officers and other service providers in aiding victims as well as the rights of the victims. Moreover, it provides protocols for court trials and punishments for perpetrators.[44]

MJF was also instrumental in passing the Hindu Marriage Registration Act out of parliament in September 2012. Prior to enacting this law, Hindu marriages in Bangladesh were not issued any legal document that would serve as evidence of marriage. As a result, it was difficult to provide proof of marriage in cases of abandonment of Hindu wives and children. MJF’s Executive Director, Shaheen Anam, revealed that Hindu women who faced domestic violence from their husbands could not acquire their constitutional support and protection of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act. [45] The Hindu Marriage Registration Act requires the registration of Hindu marriages, which provides Hindu women the ability to file for divorce. Although traditional and religious norms regarding Hindu marriages still persist, the Hindu Marriage Registration Act gives Hindu women an invaluable tool to obtain their constitutional rights.

Furthermore, MJF is engaged in ongoing advocacy to implement a Victim and Witness Protection Act. The premise behind this measure is to address the violence that victims suffer in absence of witness protection. Consultations with judges, survivors, and marginalized communities across 20 districts led to the preparation of a report proposing policies for victim and witness protection. MJF shared their findings with lawyers, civil society organizations, the Rape Law Reform Coalition of Bangladesh, and other legal aid service providers to obtain further input on the draft Act.

MJF AND THEIR PARTNERS' IMPACT ON COMBATING VAWG

Using a holistic approach, MJF has advanced the security and rights of women and girls. This approach involves exploring how men and boys can contribute to improving women's rights, how society and duty bearers have altered attitudes and practices towards eliminating gender inequality, and if women are able to make decisions at the community and household level. Selected figures of their recent work give some sense of the scale of their impact:

In 2019, the WVLP Project reached 63,135 individuals (37,632 women, 22,118 girls, and 3,385 transgender individuals) as direct beneficiaries and 92,834 individuals (3,931 women, 100 transgender individuals, and 88,803 men and boys) as intermediary beneficiaries.[46]

From 2019 to 2021, partner organizations working under the SRWG project prevented 15,748 potential child marriages and directly stopped 3,480 child marriages.

As a result of MJF's partner organization's strategy of liaising with service providers, 30,000 women received appropriate and adequate medical and legal services.

In 2019, a total of 5,484 men and boys attended monthly workshops on the importance of advancing women's rights and combating gender-based violence.[47]

COVID-19 IMPACT

Bangladesh experienced a significant increase in violence against women and girls and in child marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the support of the United Nations Population Fund, MJF conducted a rapid analysis on child marriage during the pandemic in Bangladesh; the study revealed that the circumstances which are the root causes of child marriage became more prominent during lockdown. As the world begins to move towards a post-pandemic era, MJF's partner organizations have implemented programs that aim to bring back married girls to school. Partner organizations collect information from participating schools to determine the number of students who withdrew from school during lockdowns, and of them, the number of girls who were married. Obtaining these statistics is crucial for partner organizations to create action plans on methods to encourage girls to return to school. In addition, partner organizations' staff engage with parents, in-laws, and school management regarding the importance of continuing education.

REMAINING INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

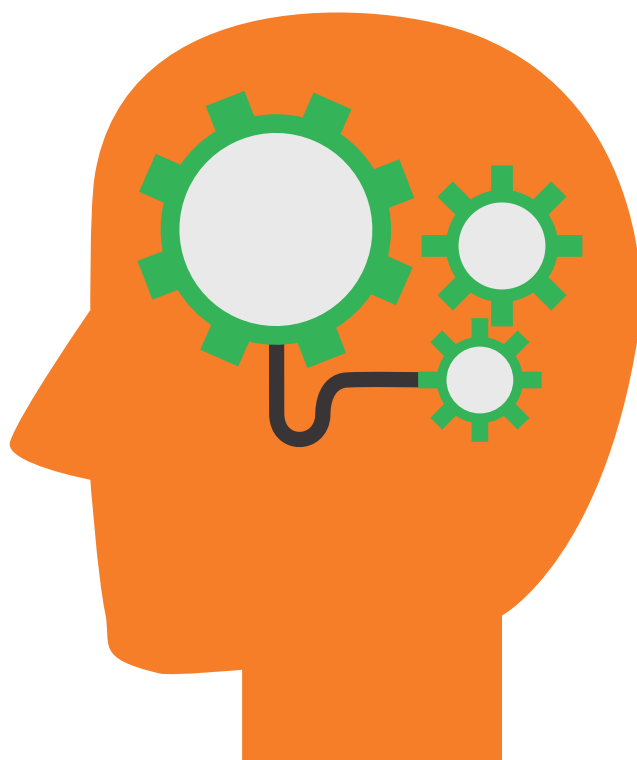
SRWG has helped implement several policies that have the potential of advancing rights, safety, and opportunities for women and girls. However, institutional challenges remain and require more systematic change. MJF's partner organizations have sensitized service providers through effective dialogue sessions on how to aptly provide aid to violence victims. However, when trained providers vacate their positions, new hires lack the proper training to aid victims. Therefore, training on sensitizing service providers must be entwined into service providing institutions.

Bureaucratic hurdles are an additional difficulty to overcome. The lengthy process of the judicial system deters violence victims from following through with the administrative burden of filing cases. As a result, many victims are dissuaded from obtaining the justice they need and deserve. Further advocacy is necessary to make the process of reporting violence more efficient. Traditional and religious attitudes regarding gender persist. For instance, the Comprehensive Hindu Marriage Law was not enacted in Bangladesh due to resistance from Hindu leaders. Even though a major policy success was implementing the Hindu Marriage Registration Act, it is not fully implemented in Hindu communities across Bangladesh. MJF continues to consult with religious leaders to seek a comprehensive shift in traditional views and attitudes through shared discourse.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM 20 YEARS OF WORK

After more than 20 years of work in combating VAWG, MJF has learned the following key lessons:

- Deep-rooted patriarchy contributes to VAWG. Therefore, the engagement of men and boys in project activities that aid them in changing their views on traditional social norms is integral. MJF has learned that when men and boys partake in critical dialogue sessions on gender equality and women's rights, they become allies to prevent VAWG.
- The underlying cause of child marriages is complex, and the most effective measure to prevent such marriages is difficult to pinpoint. Nonetheless, MJF's partner organizations' programs continue to engage community members, schools, and families in discussing the serious ramifications of child marriage.
- Women's economic independence enables them to negotiate and engage in domestic decision-making. Therefore, women and girls need education and trade-based skill training as such tutelage gives them the tools to gain employment and make economic decisions in their households.
- Investing in confidence-building and leadership skills in women and girls is key because when women and girls are self-confident, they feel empowered to speak out against discrimination and violence.
- MJF's convening power, reputation, expertise in advocacy, and relationship with local authorities helped in contributing to preventing child marriages and obtaining legal services for women survivors of gender-based violence, even during lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- People's power and collective action are integral to the work that MJF's partner organizations undertake.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Moving forward, MJF is incorporating the power of social movements to address VAWG through various programs. Utilizing social movements is key to launching the discussion over various difficult topics because it mobilizes communities and garners support from local organizations. MJF works closely with the Bangladeshi government to advocate and advance gender equity and combat VAWG which has been key to their success in drafting and implementing key policies like the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act of 2010, the Child Labor Prevention Policy of 2010, the Hindu Marriage Registration Act of 2012, and even implementing policies that would clearly define a minimum wage in garment factories and shrimp processing industries. To continue such efforts, there must be increasingly continuous coordination between MJF and various stakeholders. Strengthening communication between MJF partners will allow for timely response and delivery of programs, as well as counter the negative impact of the next pandemic or disaster.



Garments worker- MJF is working to ensure their rights, entitlements and wage

The 21st century has introduced a new age of technology that continuously influences the success of social movements. Now, the world is in the palm of peoples' hands and proves essential to work responsibilities and efficiencies. One of the lessons learned from MJF addresses this need for technological knowledge and recognizes the disparity among women, who are less likely to possess a smartphone or social media expertise.

As MJF moves into their 20th year of work, it will be important to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 and the adjustments necessary to meet the increase in demands, specifically regarding intimate partner violence. MJF surveyed 17,203 women and children in April of 2020, and of the 4,705 women and children who reported incidents of domestic violence that month, nearly half said that they experienced abuse for the first time. While the increase in demand for beneficiaries increased, various events such as grassroots level mobilizations, mass gatherings, awareness-raising events, advocacy events, and policy level activities ceased temporarily in order to meet adequate lockdown restrictions.

To avoid future staffing shortages and program inadequacies as a result of the pandemic, MJF has recognized the need for preparation in the case that similar world events transpire. In preparation for future global epidemics, a reliable data storage mechanism for the contact details of MJF beneficiaries is crucial in order to prevent delays in the output of services and programs.

COMMUNITY-BASED CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION



River erosion- a major calamity for the poor people who lives in char and riverside areas

Key Messages:

- MJF takes a participatory approach to build climate-adaptive communities so that local solutions can be brought to bear on global problems
- In the past five years, MJF's partners have taken a two-track approach: building resilient communities while also advocating for policies that take a more inclusive, ground-up approach to climate change.
- MJF acts as a bridge between marginalized communities and local government representatives to foster learning, dialogue, and change and ensure access to much-needed services.

THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is recognized as one of the nations most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change.[48] Most of Bangladesh lies in a fertile delta, which has enabled a thriving agrarian economy. However, Bangladesh has also been left vulnerable to the impacts of both slow and rapid-onset disasters, such as rising sea-levels, resulting in salinity intrusion, cyclones, storm surges, or flash flooding as a result of climate change.[49] Manusher Jonno Foundation, along with their partners, have focused their vision on prioritizing these marginalized communities to manage the effects of climate change. A particular focus has been placed on women through livelihood interventions, such as building capacities in agricultural technologies, disaster preparedness and response, and women's empowerment programming through rights awareness-raising.

The communities that inhabit the coastal areas, flat riverine pastures, and the hill tracts face the most vulnerabilities to climatic hazards and have been the main regions of focus for MJF and their partners. Each region faces different challenges against climate change, such as salinity invasion and cyclones in the coastal areas, river erosion, prolonged floods, droughts in the riverine pasture areas, and landslides, flash floods, monsoons, and drought in the hill tracts. Inhabitants of the char lands, which are newly formed islands between the riverine areas, face an increased level of exposure to natural disasters such as floods, erosion, drought, unstable land, and an absence of extension and social support services.[50] Each of these disasters creates multidimensional challenges, particularly for women. Marginalized women living below the poverty line tend to carry the heaviest burdens about the impacts of climate change. Not only are they responsible for household duties, but they are regularly engaged in income-generating activities to help support their families, as an unintended consequence of climate change has resulted in the migration of the men or breadwinners of the household.

Nearly 40% of Bangladesh's population depends on agriculture, and it serves as the primary sector of engagement; this source of livelihood income generation remains higher in rural communities than in urban ones.[51] The negative impacts of climate change in these communities are detrimental, resulting in environmental and livelihood consequences. Flooding, storm surges, and cyclones destroy crops and any yields that producers are reliant on, with rising sea levels and salinity intrusion making farming for the following crop season difficult for production. Similarly, droughts result in a lack of reliable water supply, making irrigation a challenge as communities have to find alternative sources of farming techniques. The severe weather conditions also result in a loss of livestock, where animal husbandry is an alternative common practice in rural communities. Furthermore, river erosion has resulted in a loss of homesteads and shelter, leading many to either migrate or constantly rebuild their homes with limited resources. A loss of crops and a loss of livestock does not only result in negative income impacts but also results in poor health conditions. As a consequence of contaminated water, pregnant women and children are forced to drink and bathe in water with high levels of salinity, which may result in a rise of waterborne diseases and an array of health effects. The fisheries sector also remains vulnerable due to climate change because of its economic significance, nutritional value, and social dependencies by the population. A rise in temperature, frequency, and intensity of rainfall disrupts the ecosystem, which affects the production of fish and equally negatively impacts livelihoods, health, and nutrition. While fisheries and livestock serve multifarious functions such as income, nutrition, fuel, transport, and many other purposes, the negative impacts of climate change on these sectors create additional challenges to adaptation.

Women's household duties are heavily dependent on resources such as water and livestock, and salinity intrusion and drought make their duties more difficult. Due to the scarcity of clean water, women are faced with compounded issues as they are forced to travel long distances to fetch safe water, which inadvertently results in various forms of danger, including sexual harassment. In a post-disaster context, women often face food shortages and are left without sources of income, resulting in nutrition deficiency; it is in these circumstances that child marriage is heightened. Due to the likelihood of male migration, women's roles are increasingly changing from unpaid work to include income generation activities. Women and girls in particular are distinctly among the most vulnerable due to their exclusion in the decision-making process and limited access to resources. For instance, it is not uncommon that women's agricultural resources such as livestock are the first to be sold in times of scarcity, while men's resources are maintained.[52] Furthermore, cyclones and floods have been associated with death rates for women up to five times higher than men due to women's inaccessibility to information that is often distributed in public places, as women may be restricted to their homes unless accompanied by a male relative, or their inability to swim.[53]



As a result of the multidimensional effects of climate change on women, children, and marginalized communities in Bangladesh, MJF is working with local partners to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change through resilience building and capacity building of affected communities and local government representatives.

RESILIENCE BUILDING



Boats where bede community lives

As climate change-based disasters become more frequent for the people of Bangladesh, building a resilient community is paramount for the survival of the population. With coastal flooding, erosion, and cyclones consistently hindering the safety and livelihoods of the people, finding new infrastructure and residential frameworks to ensure the welfare of those most affected will help continue the survival of all social classes in Bangladesh. The key steps to building a safer community and country will be achieved through bottom-up participatory adaptation practices, disaster risk reduction through climate-resilient infrastructure, and the diversification of livelihoods with an emphasis on gender.

Resilience is a mechanism of self-organization and the capacity to learn from experience, process information, and adapt accordingly.[54] Resilience is a concept that is broader than just recovery and encompasses a system's ability to cope with the current hazard as well as its capacity to reduce exposure to hazards in general.[55] The concept is important as it fosters an integrated approach to climate change adaptation across sectors. However, resilience building also has important limitations, specifically as it is not a pro-poor concept because poverty reduction cannot be substituted by resilience building.[56] Nonetheless, resilience building is critical to climate change adaptation in local Bangladeshi communities.

Inclusive local bottom-up adaptation approaches to climate change impacts are critical. The development research community uses a broad definition of vulnerability, referring to it as a combination of sensitivity, exposure, and response capacity. Vulnerability is most severe in Bangladesh coastal areas as these communities are experiencing more depression and cyclones, soil and water salinity, coastal erosion, thunderstorms, tidal surge, and hailstorms.[57] Coastal and riverine communities in Bangladesh are highly vulnerable because of their low adaptive capacity and direct exposure to natural disasters. Depending on the extent of sea-level rise in the coming decades, an estimated 15 to 30 million Bangladeshis could be displaced from coastal areas.[58] It has been reported that 90 million Bangladeshis, which is 56% of the population, live in high climate exposure areas with 53 million subject to very high exposure.[59] These projections show the severity of the situation in Bangladesh and the need for climate adaptation.

Understanding climate vulnerability is critical to designing effective development programming aimed at reducing this vulnerability. There must be support for the most vulnerable communities to deal with climate change impacts on their lives and livelihoods in Bangladesh as these communities are the most vulnerable and suffer significantly higher economic, physical, and structural damage. The inclusion of those whose livelihoods are worst-affected and who lack decision making representation is crucial in the adaptation process to ensure that it is effective in reducing vulnerability and creating resilient communities.

Resilience building is a task that must be implemented nationwide to protect the people and country of Bangladesh. The first step towards building resilient communities is grassroots-level discussion and information sharing. Although investment into scientific research and development will be heavily beneficial, community-led information sharing will create the solid groundwork to lead the next steps of innovation.



Women specifically will be a great resource as they are socially viewed to provide the welfare for the families in communities. Additionally, as clean water and food become more difficult to access, women can provide insight into processes that work to address these issues. Social mobility is also created as a result of information sharing, as women in communities can voice their opinions and create cultural change within the country.

Social learning is a process involving demonstrated changes in understanding that goes beyond the boundaries of a person to become situated within wider social communities of practice through social interactions among various social actors and networks. Social learning-based collective action is achieved through partnerships and multi-stakeholder engagement. It is necessary to have spaces where diverse social actors can deliberately engage in dialogue, debate, and network creation to achieve collective goals. Learning needs to be translated into action to build resilience, as community resilience largely depends on the ability to act collectively.[60]

Resilience is being built through community-based adaptation in Bangladesh. Finding ways to support the community while adapting to a changing ecosystem is essential for safety and sustainability in Bangladesh. As deforestation due to wood use creates a larger natural impact on the area, finding alternative fuel sources is an important way to support the communities while also protecting them from further climate change-based disasters. Another leading issue in the fight against climate change is erosion within the water adjacent areas. Using a technique called bandalling, which is a bamboo structure that can reduce river erosion, will help negate some of the larger impacts of rising water levels and Bangladesh's tendency to be prone to flooding.[61] Floating agriculture will also help negate these impacts since rising water levels or flooding will not directly impact the production of food or resources because the farms will be able to rise and lower with the water levels. Although these systems will not counteract the increasing pressure and impact of climate change, they are great ways for the people of Bangladesh to implement climate-resilient techniques and build adaptive capacities. MJF and its partners have made resilience building in vulnerable communities and climate change adaptation a top priority.

JOURNEY TOWARDS BUILDING RESILIENCE: MJF AND THEIR PARTNERS

In 2017, Manusher Jonno Foundation began the important work of addressing the impact of climate change in Bangladesh with their partners. Within those five years, MJF has taken a bottom-up approach, prioritizing the needs and participation of vulnerable and marginalized communities. The climate change project granted community members the capacity to identify their risks in relation to climate change impacts and create priority interventions to reduce their vulnerability.

Since 2017, MJF has focused on building community resilience, increasing communities' access to social services, and working to establish government responsiveness. Moving forward, MJF's goal is to begin working on climate justice and governance while advocating for women's inclusive policies. The Foundation plans to do so by continuing to serve as a bridge between the grassroots and national level, providing a platform for change. This section is dedicated to exploring the important work that MJF and their partners have undergone to address this pressing issue, discuss where they plan to go from here, and highlight the lessons learned.

BUILDING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

In 2017, MJF began the SIDA project (supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) to address the issue of climate change. Nine partners were involved in building resilient communities at the grassroots level in eight districts: 12 upazilas, 45 unions, and 329 villages. In the first year alone, 505 groups were formed, consisting of 430 community groups, 60 volunteer groups, and 15 village common forest committees.

Women, farmers, and youth groups worked together to identify risks and vulnerabilities to climate change and created adaptation plans for the future through mobilization meetings. Community groups developed Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessments to generate adaptation plans. These plans were then taken at the Union and Upazila level to local government institutions for endorsement and implementation. A total of 379 initiatives created by the community adaptation plans were implemented by local government institutions. Groups were also involved in strengthening community resilience, promoting climate adaptive agricultural practices, facilitating early warning systems and disaster preparedness, and conserving natural forests.[62]

In 2018, the SIDA project continued by promoting climate-smart agriculture technologies that improved access to food, diversified income, and increased resilience to climate change. MJF intervened in mitigation to different ecological zones of remote coastal, floodplain, and Chittagong Hill tracts regions. Women, men, community, youth, and farmer groups received a variety of training ranging from climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and cultivation techniques. Farmers received climate tolerant seeds and cultivated climate-adaptive paddy (rice) varieties. Additionally, SIDA partners raised plinths to build flood resilient houses in seven flood plain cluster villages, where 120 households resided in the Gaibandha District. [63]

In 2019, approximately 4,000 individuals were directly reached through training regarding issues such as income-generating activities, emergency response and rescue, climate change adaptation, and disaster risk reduction. When the cyclone FANI hit coastal areas of Bangladesh, project volunteers put their training into practice by disseminating warning systems, rescuing people, and aiding in shelter management from

In 2020, MJF also began an additional project titled "Sustainable Oceans: Improving sustainable economic growth natural disasters. Volunteers proactively participated in the same way during the Bulbul, Amphan, and Yaash landslides. Additionally, more than 1,000 farmers began using climate adaptive technologies, such as saline tolerant variety cultivation, cultivation on raised beds and bags, and engaging in climate-smart fish culture and crab fattening.[64]and development opportunities through efficient and sustainable use of human rights-centric fisheries and aquaculture resources in Bangladesh." The project engaged in a sector-wide impact assessment, hosted a seminar, provided dialogues and webinar series, and developed research initiatives.[65]

The COVID-19 pandemic only increased barriers and challenges to building resiliency in communities. Growing poverty rates resulted in a decrease in income generation, especially among women and girl workers. Therefore, family income became an area of focus in building resiliency during the pandemic. In 2021, a total of 6,479 beneficiaries adopted climate adaptive practices in crop cultivation. Furthermore, 3,855 beneficiaries practiced income-generating activities, including the rearing of goats, cows, sheep, and poultry; handicraft making; tailoring; seed and grocery businesses; and more.[66]

Since the beginning of the project, 3,894 beneficiaries received training on climate adaptive agricultural technologies. From the coastal regions, 265 households received water tanks to harvest rain water to utilize during dry seasons, and 500 households received improved cooking stoves. Hilltrack communities received rice banks for borrowing rice in lean time periods and also received gravity force systems and deep set pumps to ensure water availability.

Livelihood improvement can be seen in the case of Nasima Begum. Nasima joined a Gaibandha community group back in 2017, after losing her home eight times from river erosion. Being a landless woman, she was not able to engage in agricultural income generating activities. After joining the community group, Nasima was granted a climate resilience house after communicating with the Union Disaster Management Committee. Furthermore, she was awarded an interest-free loan and began rearing goats and cows for income. Now, Nasima is making 8,000 Bangladesh taka per month (USD 92) and can support her sick husband and their family.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES

Two years into the SIDA project, MJF conducted research to identify what was working in the project and what could be improved. In the research, MJF observed that the vulnerability of women to climate change is much higher due to socio-economic conditions and limited access to facilities or services. Moving forward, MJF strongly encouraged the effective engagement of women in climate-adaptive programs and began improving women's access to social services.[67]

In 2019, hundreds of women received access to health services in community clinics. Access to health services allowed women to receive the care they needed, and 11 women were finally able to receive tuberculosis treatment. Additionally, hundreds of women received Vulnerable Group Development or Vulnerable Group Feeding cards, allowing them easier and less costly access to food. Thousands of women received different types of services such as advice, training, and input support from the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Livestock. In the Bhold district, 680 beneficiaries of Toxumudding Upazila began an upcoming project in collaboration with the Department of Livestock for further support.[68]

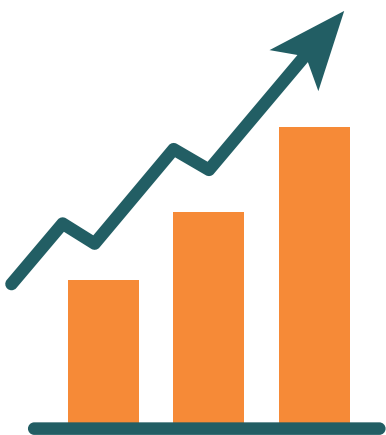
During the same year, access to vaccines increased in hard-to-reach areas, reducing vulnerabilities to poor health and diseases due to climate change. Communities were additionally granted support to establish food banks to store their food for lean periods, reducing their vulnerability to food deprivation. It was important that access to health and food services were implemented in 2019, because in 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak led Bangladesh to experience additional hardships. Nevertheless, MJF was determined to continue contributing to strengthening community capacity and governance mechanisms regarding climate change.[69]

ESTABLISHING GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS

MJF and their partners emphasize improving the responsiveness of duty bearers. The focus is to improve the responsiveness of the Department of Agricultural Extension, Department of Livestock, Department of Women Affairs, Department Fisheries, community clinics, and the Union parishad. Improving responsiveness is done by utilizing social accountability tools, such as public hearings, community score cards, and social auditing. This work has strengthened the commitment of duty bearers to address the demand of the communities they serve and their rights. From this work, more than 16,000 beneficiaries and their households have received social safety net support since 2017.

An important partner for MJF is Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK), or The People's Development Center. GUK shares similar values to MJF of taking a bottom-up approach to prioritize vulnerable and marginalized communities. The organizations collaborate by sharing valuable information and work together to find potential solutions to the climate crisis moving forward. GUK's model is to allow Bangladeshi citizens to continue with their normal lives despite the climate crisis.

GUK works in the northern char area of Bangladesh where frequent flooding occurs. Many houses in the area are made of straw and are vulnerable to the pressing issue of inundation. The organization establishes community resilience by raising the platform of houses and informing the community about how to cope with climate change. Another important aspect of GUK's work is using social accountability tools to increase government responsiveness and access to service providers.



The biggest challenge that GUK has faced in attempts to increase government responsiveness is convincing government officials that things need to change. Oftentimes, the organization finds it difficult to convince the government to support vulnerable communities because it requires new innovations to be put into place. Nevertheless, GUK remains dedicated to improving the lives of vulnerable communities and believes that the government will adopt these innovations over time. As of 2021, more than 1,096 representatives from local government institutions and 515 civil society representatives received training on disaster and climate change issues.

LOOKING FORWARD

In just five years, MJF and their partners have done significant work to build resilient communities in the face of the climate crisis. They have done so through various community trainings, disaster risk reduction, and the diversification of livelihoods. Throughout the years, an integrative bottom-up approach has been prioritized to include vulnerable and marginalized communities in their initiatives. They have worked hard to improve social services for climate affected communities and are beginning to work towards establishing government responsiveness.

The organization has made distinct progress on climate-adaptive technology, and it is now their goal to begin work on climate justice and governance. Women and girls faced hurdles to accessing safe drinking water, agricultural support, and accessing shelters. Through advocacy, MJF and their partners have advocated for women's inclusive policies. Currently, MJF serves as a bridge between the grassroots level and the national level by organizing events where women from coastal areas have the opportunity to talk with policymakers, ambassadors, and high commissioners. This allows women to raise their voices, claim their rights, and discuss their concerns regarding climate change policy.

Although the program has only been in place for five years, important work has been done. Now, MJF is focusing on something bigger. MJF is shifting from supporting communities to meet their needs to advocating for their rights. The organization is working towards creating social accountability tools to foster affirmative obligations on the state level, making service providers accountable to the communities they serve. One of the biggest challenges they have faced is that it takes a lot of time and effort to change policies. Resource limitations and restricted access to services have been a roadblock to providing support that communities need. Moving forward, advocating for government responsiveness is how MJF hopes to resolve these issues to continue supporting the vulnerable communities they work with.

Future of MJF

What does the future hold for MJF, their partners, and the communities they work with and for?

This section explores some of the future and enduring challenges MJF faces in creating “a world free from poverty, exploitation and discrimination where people live in freedom, dignity and human security,” while advancing its mission to “promote human rights and governance through partnership with relevant stakeholders, including duty bearers, to ensure dignity and wellbeing of all people, especially the marginalized.”



BUILDING ACCOUNTABLE AND RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE

For more than a decade, MJF and its partners have worked to build more accountable and responsive governance at all levels of government in Bangladesh with a focus on citizen engagement. Despite the many challenges presented during the COVID-19 pandemic, MJF has continued to strengthen public institutions. As Bangladesh emerges from the pandemic, MJF will further the positive impact of its work through its learned experiences both prior to and during the pandemic. By focusing on all levels of government, adapting approaches and strategies for facilitating social accountability to challenges, prioritizing public administration capacity building, and facilitating community empowerment and direct citizen engagement, MJF will continue to strengthen Bangladesh's public institutions moving forward. A critical challenge facing MJF and their partners' work on strengthening public institutions is that civic space has been shrinking in Bangladesh, making advocacy work and demands for policy reforms and their implementation ever more dangerous and challenging. MJF will continue to prioritize its work using social accountability strategies to strengthen citizens' rights and capacities, and state agencies' capacities to deliver, but it increasingly needs to carefully navigate complex and risky terrain. With its strong local partner organizations, MJF is, however, in a good position to maintain its work at the sub-national level while simultaneously pushing for national-level reforms where possible.

TACKLING MARGINALIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION

MJF has found significant success in creating changes for marginalized communities since 2002. Looking forward, MJF is eager to find ways to mainstream and improve the ways that Bangladeshi citizens view marginalized communities, as well as the ways that those from marginalized communities view themselves. In the pursuit of inclusivity, MJF will work to advocate for and create a society where those who traditionally have not belonged can find their own place and identity. MJF is working to create a more inclusive society, both by persuading and encouraging marginalized people to take their rights into their own hands and through the advocacy and pursuit of policy changes that will improve equality. Remarkable successes include raising societal awareness of discrimination and stigmatization of entire communities and supporting those communities to build their own organizations and mobilize their people behind their rights. This has paved the way for policy and legal changes, which have powerful potential to change the lives of some of the world's most vulnerable people for the better.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

MJF and its partner organizations hope to further advance women's and girls' rights and security as Bangladesh moves toward a post-pandemic world. Drawing from its 20 years of experience, MJF learned that deep-rooted patriarchal norms in society can be dismantled most effectively when women's rights organizations make men and boys aware of gender-based violence, sensitize service providers to the needs of violence victims, and build leadership skills and confidence in women and girls so that they can have agency to stand up for their rights. The COVID-19 pandemic has again shown, however, how fragile gender equality gains can be: existing women's rights organizations and networks with which MJF has partnered have taken swift and effective action to combat the resurgence in violence and child marriage during the crisis. Nevertheless, the pandemic has again underlined the fact that combating VAWG is a deeply challenging task that tackles male privilege and powerful societal norms. MJF is committed to deepening and broadening their work addressing women's rights in general, with combating VAWG only the most visible and urgent feature of their women's rights work.

ADVOCATING FOR CLIMATE INCLUSIVE POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

Since 2017, MJF and their partners have done considerable work in climate change adaptation. By taking a bottom-up approach that focuses on the vulnerable and marginalized, MJF has contributed to community resilience building through disaster risk reduction, organized group training, access to social services, and more. It is MJF's goal to use what they have learned in the past five years to focus their efforts on climate governance justice and women-inclusive climate policies. Adaptation to climate change is the newest of MJF's focal areas but one in which their learning about promoting human rights, building collective agency, and engaging government authorities with local communities on other issues has already started to show results. Funding permitting, MJF will continue to support partner organizations working on community-based adaptation and engaging with government services to ensure people at the greatest risk of climate change get the support and recognition they need. This is now Bangladesh's most pressing challenge, and MJF has the experience and the commitment to innovate and sustain action for the people left most vulnerable to the climate crisis.

Supporting Social Movements: Key Lessons from MJF's 20 years

It is clear from this report that MJF makes a significant contribution to the improvement of the lives of poor and marginalized people in Bangladesh. Since 2002, MJF has changed the face of human rights and equality for marginalized groups through the pursuit of effective movement in the areas of Building Accountable and Responsive Governance, Tackling Marginalization and Discrimination, Combating Violence Against Women and Girls, and Climate Change Adaptation. They have seen substantial improvements in these areas as a result of their efforts, including policy changes and the empowerment of thousands of individuals.

MJF faces many challenges in their pursuit of these goals, many of which are related to weak or poorly managed institutions, and inconsistent and incomplete governance practices. They seek to make changes at the institutional level (through advocacy and lobbying work) and at the individual level (through empowerment of local communities and the creation of institution building groups). Through their involvement in activities such as funding, advocacy, research, and monitoring and evaluation, MJF has and will continue to make a difference in the lives of those living under exploitation and poverty as a result of their place in society.

MJF never acts alone, and it credits the advances it has helped to make to the almost 500 NGOs, civil

society groups, human rights organizations, social movements, and other partner organizations that it has supported over the past 20 years. Specifically, it has provided financial support, technical assistance, and help with organizational development that has enabled many organizations to institutionalize, attract, and use funding from other sources while innovating and sustaining their work. Local organizations benefit, in addition, from a strong, credible ally with both a national and international standing such as MJF, who can support them in conflicts with public authorities, give them access to national and global platforms on which to articulate demands and push for change, and integrate their work at multiple levels of the policy process.

MJF has spent approximately USD 100 million (current equivalent) over the past 20 years, channeling these resources towards empowering and capacity development for some of the world's most marginalized and vulnerable people. This remarkable work is not merely about providing people with services and resources: it results in enduring gains as people build common agendas and shared goals, institutions, and strategies that last beyond the lifetime of projects. A key lesson about the MJF experience is that it is possible to support small human rights and civil society organizations, including those that represent some of the world's most marginalized and vulnerable populations.

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