

Listening, Understanding and taking Action Change life

Challenge and transform social norms and practices for better life and livelihood

This is a real story, Ranu Begum, a hard working fighting lady lives in Basundhara village in Satkhira, her story tells the affect and impact of social bondage, culture and practice in people life and how these push families to difficulties. She is a business women sales fire wood in her shop for villagers. This is her income, and she lives in a single room next to her shop. Her day starts early in the morning and ends late at night. Her life has been transformed in association with SOHAY she feelss this is a life changing learning and thinking. She is now a voice in the society, playing important role, helping women in difficulties in the village by giving them right advice and suggestions. SOHAY stands by her side taught her how to fight back and challenges the social culture and practices if go against. The learning refrained her entering into another hardship and difficulties. Here SOHAY will highlight the downside of the social culture and practices. Ranu Begum is the vivid example where the social capital and culture are the cause for her hardship and difficulties. This is our general understanding and belief that social bondage, capital and culture helped people living in peace and harmony. SOHAY agrees the social culture, practice and bondage are important in social life and play crucial role. But SOHAY closely observed that if the good social culture and practices are undermined by the bad practices then the result is totally different. SOHAY would like to pass the message to all that the social culture, practice and bondages are helpful for families' life if the society uses it positively.



Ranu Begum's husband left her with two daughters married another lady moved to other location, stopped paying any expenditure for this family, the society did not help her during the difficult time. None was by her side. So, for Ranu Begum Society does not mean anything rather a curse, she did not like the society till SOHAY engaged her differently to play a critical role to help others living in the same situation in her neighbor. Ranu Begum in her hard



time was looking for work, but did not get any; she was advised by a relative to start business of firewood for survival, she started her own firewood selling shop. Slowly, she started earning and managing the family expenditure. She gave marriage of her elder daughter to a day laborer due the influence by the society, thought it will give her financial relief. The arguments were she will be relieved and one less mouth she has to feed if she gives marriage to her elder daughter. She will be economically in good situation with her younger daughter. According to her the fact is different. She did not think of the other expenditures associated to this act; she paid the dowry for her elder daughter happiness. She earns

very little, she knew she needed money for the marriage of her daughters, so she saved money from her tiny income. During the marriage ceremony of her first daughter she spent all her savings, borrowed money from relatives and neighbors for the marriage cost. Now she has to pay the dowry and other demand of her son-in-law including she has to repay the loan to relatives and neighbors. She worked long hard hours for the smiles of her children life, but

she still did not see the lights end of the tunnel. She also does not know when the comfort time will come, and does not think will come soon. Ranu Begum's experience is listening the community did not reduce hardship and pain. She entered into another form of hardship. Her younger daughter is growing now sixteen years of age. The same local neighbors and relatives were pushing her to do the same she did for her elder daughter. She also felt forced listening to them. Her daughter did not go to school, stay home with her and move around the villages with friends. She felt if she do not listen the local people it would be hard for her to give marriage of this girl in future. She was in dilemma what she should do.

SOHAY's combating gender based violence project in Labsa union, Satkhira started last year. Under the project activities SOHAY formed 20 women groups of women age between 31 to 50 years age who are poor, landless, female headed, ethnic minorities, excluded women etc in society. As the group members from the same socio-economic situation and conditions they spoke freely and fearlessly in the discussion and did not feel difficulties of sharing personal experiences with others. At group formation discussion and courtyard meeting in the community SOHAY staff highlighted how the village women became victimized of violence in society and enter into different difficulties. As a group general secretary Ranu Begum listened carefully what SOHAY staff discussed found it similar to her experience in life. She spoke with the SOHAY staff alone and told what she was undergoing.



SOHAY field staff requested Ranu Begum to come to SOHAY office for detail discussion and to understand the real problem. The team sat and discussed the root cause of the problem and difficulties; through analyzing the situation and detail discussion with Ranu Begum and with neighbors they came to the conclusion that the **social culture and practices in this case is the real culprit**. This has also been revealed that the present situation is not because of something had happened yesterday or a year before; this has cropped and grew over a number of years. The illiterate women like Ranu Begum despite born and brought up in the society, does not have any value in the eye of the society, unfortunately, they have no value as human too. Women like Ranu Begum always were looking for alternative ways, how they could fight back to the situation that they do not want to enter. SOHAY played a critical role here; SOHAY arranged a local discussion meeting, where neighbors, local government representatives, local elites and influential members joined. SOHAY Project coordinator explained what SOHAY so far did in detail discussion with Ranu Begum.

As per the guidance from the SOHAY management, the Project Coordinator appreciated the social culture and practice and the good intention of the community of helping Ranu Begum, this is good that the community is thinking how they could reduce the burden of Ranu Begum. He also said SOHAY is very happy seeing such a community where people think about neighbors. He said SOHAY would be very happy if the community in this meeting also thinks the other side of the coin (the difficulties Ranu Begum is under). And that side is not as bright as all had thought. He said marriage is not a solution of any problem, it can create additional burden on families as well. He said at the age of 16 this would be unwise to give marriage of her younger daughter, because her daughter is not yet physically and mentally ready for marriage. He also asked the critical question to the community that how many of them with full confidence can say marriage of her younger daughter is the right solution at this stage. How many of

them can guarantee that her younger son in law will be good boy and will not demand anything from her mother in law.

There were good discussion and arguments among the participants. At one point the participants were divided along the line of their opinion. The SOHAY team listened to all, asked simple but critical questions to the participants that what they had done if they were in the same situation Ranu Begum is now. The discussion then started to changed the direction slowly, SOHAY team informed them Ranu Begum's present situation and how as her neighbor they could help her. Following a through discussion they all came to common ground that giving marriage of her younger daughter at this time and age is not the solution and the same for every family in the village. So, Ranu Begum has to think what she could do with her younger daughter now. She can think the marriage of her daughter in three four years time.

Ranu Begum is thankful to SOHAY for their assistance to help her; she is feeling a huge relief. She also thanks SOHAY chosen her village for combating gender based violence project. Ranu Begum Join the programme as one of the families will work with SOHAY to ensure women dignity in life and the way of helping families.

Ranu Begum is the secretary of the SOHAY formed women group in the Basundhara village. She is now one of the leading women in the village stand by the side of women in difficulties. Women in the village come to her for assistance and learn from her experience how to face difficult time. Ranu Begum and her team are thinking of building strong relationship with the local community leaders, law and enforcing agencies and union parishad. She and her team have contributed a lot in child marriages in the village through counseling, motivation & taking different steps, several child marriage were stopped. Ranu Begum is now a name of change in the village.

SOHAY got permission from Ranu Bugum to share her story with other participants / beneficiaries SOHAY works with without disclosing the name and location.

The story drafted by the SOHAY Field Team in Satkhira.

The story is finalized by the SOHAY team in Head Office

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