

# BACHAR ASHA SANGSKRITIK SANGATHAN PROMOTES TRANSGENDER AND COMMUNITY RIGHTS IN RAJSHAHI



Transgender community leader Mostafa Sarker Bijli poses with her colleagues in front of her office

Bachar Asha Sangskritik Sangathan is an NGO run entirely by transgender people from a small office in the labyrinthine Nowahata neighbourhood of Rajshahi. The President of the organization, Mostafa Sarker Bijli, identifying as a trans-woman, says they are forced to operate from the shadows to avoid mistreatment from the people in general.

Without access to decent education, employment, health, and even basic shelter, transgender people in Bangladesh mostly work as cheap sex workers, making way for an inhumane exploitation systematically segregated from the mainstream. “Even the Imams do not want us to be buried in graveyards. What are we supposed to do with our dead bodies?” Bijli asks rhetorically to illustrate their desperation and plight.

Bijli talks about systematic abuses faced by the transgender community with a casual indifference, highlighting the fact that they have faced this since birth, mostly from their own families. Bijli, now leading a group of 108 transgender people in Nowhata, was raped and molested as a child and the sexual abuse never stopped - something that almost every transgender child faces, she explains. Despite everything, Mostafa Sarker Bijli was able to overcome barriers with an indomitable spirit. Bijli used to perform in Jatras (rural theatres) with other transgender people and observed that only people from the NGOs talked to them without any hesitation and provided them with some support.



Back in 1998, Bijli gathered 55 transgender people, mostly acquaintances from his cultural performances, and decided to form an NGO of their own to work for the rights of transgender people. "We lived sub-human lives and we needed to do something ourselves for our rights."

Since its formal beginning in 2003, Bijli's NGO has worked with many projects to improve the lives of transgender people in Natore, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, and Rangpur. Now in 2020, the NGO addresses a whole range of issues including financial, medical, legal, and housing support issues for transgender people. Bijli and her fellow transgender leaders have taken part in pride parades, stood up for their voting rights, and confronted policymakers about transgender rights.

Since 2017, Bachar Asha Sangskritik Sangathan has been enlisted as a Civil Society Organization (CSO) with Platforms for Dialogue (P4D), a European Union-funded project in partnership with the Bangladesh Cabinet Division, implemented by the British Council. Facilitated by the P4D stakeholders, Bijli's organization has, for the first time, been able to work for people outside its own community. Through Social Action Projects (SAPs), Bachar Asha has involved farmers, clinic patients, educational institutions, and local government officials in organised seminars and meetings on the citizen's charter, school dropouts, and child labour.

Mostafa Sarker Bijli says the participation of people in these P4D SAPs has been overwhelming. "We were welcomed there with respect. We were given a chance to spread good, and we did just that." The leader of the transgender community reminds us that transgender people still face discrimination every step of the way and a lot more needs to change. "It is a great start," said Bijli. The fact that Bachar Asha Sangskritik Sangathan, a traditionally marginalised organisation, is able to grow its scope of work and impact the community at large is a big step towards effective CSO involvement in the development of social accountability tools.



Mostafa Sarker Bijli, President of Bachar Asha Sangskritik Sangathan, addresses colleagues and local stakeholders from her office in Rajshahi

*This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Platforms for Dialogue and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.*