

IN NATORE, CSO SHOPNO SHOMAJ UNNOYON SHONGSTHA CHANGES LIVES FOR YOUNG WOMEN



A Shopno Shomaj Unnoyon Shongstha sewing classroom for local women run by Parvin Akter in Natore

Bangladesh is ranked 4th in the world for highest child marriage rates, and nearly 4.5 million girls are married before the age of 18, according to a 2017 UNICEF study. Despite government efforts to ban marriage before the age of 18, roughly 22% of girls find themselves married before they turn 18 with a fifth being married off before turning 15. A victim of child marriage herself, Parvin Akter of Natore wanted to give girls in her community a voice to fight this social malpractice and a means to stand on their own feet. “I was married off when I was in the 6th grade. I don’t want any other girl to have the same fate,” said Akter in a recent conversation.

Now, her organisation, Shopno Shomaj Unnoyon Shongstha, is renowned not only in Natore, but across the country thanks to the Platforms for Dialogue (P4D) project. The European Union-funded P4D initiative, which is implemented by the British Council in partnership with the government’s Cabinet Division, has helped Parvin Akter grow her organisation to reach the greater community in Natore district.

In 1999, Parvin Akter founded Shopno Shomaj to curb violence against women and reduce child marriage, when it became a registered organisation with the government’s youth development and social service departments. “The beginning was not so easy, and I was lucky to have a supportive husband who stood beside me in all my endeavours,” says Akter.



Initially, Parvin Akter was running bamboo handicraft projects. Later, she began working with a tree plantation and opened a sewing school to help young women provide for themselves. Through these training opportunities, Shopno has created job opportunities for many people. "I want people to stand on their own feet; especially girls. They don't necessarily have to get a job somewhere, but I want to help them create their own source of income," says a hopeful Parvin Akter. To date, the total number of beneficiaries of Shopno exceeds 7,000.

Besides preventing child marriage, Parvin Akter also runs a free school for underprivileged children named Shopno Shidhu Bikash Kendro. "No one has to pay a single penny. We provide them with books, backpacks and stationery." Shopno runs on membership fees, government funding, individual donations, and of course the hard work of volunteers.

One of P4D's initiatives is to help local organisations collaborate with other local leaders to engage their communities in Social Action Projects (SAPs). SAPs are designed to address the most pressing issues in a community, and in partnership with P4D, Shopno is focusing on three major topics- child marriage prevention, drug control, and land rights. "When it comes to ending child marriage", Akter said "first, we have to convince the elders about how it affects young girls before we hope to succeed."

Parvin Akter says that the British Council has helped them have a voice among local people. By association, "our voice has gained huge credibility just because British Council is with us. We've also gained valuable experience and training through P4D projects which will help us grow in the future."

With this experience, Parvin Akter hopes to build a one-stop service centre under the name Shopno Shomaj Unnoyon Shongstha, where the people in her community can receive all social services in one place.



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