

Maternal Death Registration and Record Keeping in Bangladesh: Closing the Gaps Advocacy Brief

Introduction:

The Government of Bangladesh is committed to reduce Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) from 194 in 2010 to 134 in 2015¹. In the absence of reliable figures neither the benchmark nor the progress in maternal death reduction can be correctly ascertained.

In Bangladesh maternal deaths are primarily recorded at two points: service delivery sites such as hospitals/clinics/health facilities and in local government registers.

According to the Birth and Death Registration Act 2004², replacing the Birth and Death Registration Act of 1873³, it is mandatory to register the births and deaths of every Bangladeshi. The Act also makes it mandatory to report all births within 45 days and all deaths within 30 days of occurrence.

In order to ensure registration of births and deaths, to monitor the registration system and to assist in this activity, there is a Standing Committee on birth and death registration at each Union *Parishad* under Local Government Act, 2009⁴.

Designated members of Union *Parishad*, *Chowkidar*/village police, *Pourashava* and City Corporation Mayors and councillors, government health and family welfare workers, NGO staffs, responsible person of hospital or clinic, superintendent of graveyards and in case of an unidentified body duty officer of relevant Police Station will provide information regarding the death to the nearest registrar.

In order to digitalize all information at Union level and to ensure flow of information, the government has established Union Information Centres to facilitate online birth registration. It is in the process of introducing online death registration.

The lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh is the Union *Parishad*, which is a council of 13 elected persons (1 Chairman, 9 members representing general seats in 3 wards, and 3 representing reserved seats for women). This body is mandated to register all births and deaths within its jurisdiction with the help of a *chowkidar* (paid staff designated to register all births and deaths and collect revenue).

Objectives:

Local government bodies in selected unions and municipalities activated to fulfill their duty with regard to the registration of maternal deaths and the maintenance of maternal death records.

Strategy:

Participatory workshops with key members of local government bodies and district level functionaries to introduce them to the issue of maternal mortality in Bangladesh and the lapses in recording and record keeping of maternal deaths, Bangladesh's obligations under the Millennium Development Goals, domestic law regarding registration of births and deaths and the duties of local government bodies and functionaries in this regard.

Activities and Summary of key outcomes:

- WHRAP project of Naripokkho is implementing the programme with the assistance of its partner Community Based Organisation (CBO), Nazrul Smriti Sangsad (NSS) in all 6 *upazilas* of Barguna district, which includes 42 Union *Parishads* and 4 *Pourashavas*
- In total 46 workshops were organised at 6 *Upazilas*, 42 Union *Parishads* and 4 *Pourashavas* to strengthen maternal death registration system and to ensure accurate registration of maternal deaths. Elected representatives of *Pourashava*, members and secretaries of Union *Parishads*, *Chowkidar*/village police, Union Information Officer, local journalists, NGO representatives and members of the local elite were present in those workshops.



¹ Bangladesh Maternal Mortality and Health Care Survey, 2010

² Birth and Death Registration Act, 2004

³ Birth and Death Registration Act, 1873

⁴ Union *Parishad* under Local Government Act, 2009

- At district level, 7 workshops were organised with the presence of officers from Health and Family Planning Departments, officers from Local Government Division, *Upazila* Family Planning officers and Statistician, NGO representatives, local people and journalists from 6 press clubs. Altogether 1,094 people attended these workshops.

Achievements:

- Workshop participants are informed about maternal death and the importance of registering maternal deaths.
- “Standing Committee on Birth and Death Registration” formed in 38 Union *Parishads*.
- Maternal death registration system at Union *Parishad* and *Pourashava* is being monitored, as a result maternal deaths are being registered and preserved properly.
- At Amtoli *Pourashava*, the cause of death was not mentioned in death certificates earlier. Now, the death certificate form has been amended adding a question on the ‘cause of death’.
- In Barguna the Health, Family Planning and Local Government departments have initiated district level coordination of maternal death information. Naripokkho and its CBO partner have at their request taken responsibility for this coordination.

Challenges:

The main challenge is the non-implementation of the law and rules regarding birth and death registration, and lack of accountability for non-compliance. Overall lack of monitoring and accountability at every stage are great challenges to ensure registration of maternal deaths.

- Union *Parishads*, Union Health and Family Welfare Centres, *Upazila* Health Complexes, *Upazila* Family Welfare Offices, District Hospitals, Mother and Child Welfare Centres, keep records of maternal deaths, but there are lapses whereby all maternal deaths are either not recorded or there is double counting in the case of some.
- According to government regulations, information collected through Health, Family Planning and Local Government departments should be incorporated in to the national aggregate. Records of maternal deaths from Union *Parishads* and *Pourashavas* in a specific format are supposed to be sent to *Upazila Nirbahi* Officer on a monthly basis but this is not practiced.
- There is a Standing Committee in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to estimate Bangladesh’s Maternal Mortality Ratio, but the committee is defunct.

- People are not aware about the obligation to report or about the penal consequences of not reporting. Because the law is not enforced, people do not take any initiative to register deaths.
- Negligence of Union *Parishad* Chairmen, Members, Secretary, *Chowkidar* and designated persons to register the deaths at Union Information Centres.
- Delay in formation of the Standing Committee on Birth and Death registration has hindered the Committee’s responsibility to ensure registration, monitor the registration system and support this activity.
- Lack of effective coordination in information collection at Union, *Upazila* and District level.
- Lack of correct instruction to *Chowkidar* for collecting information on maternal deaths and the absence of a monetary allowance for this task.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen Vital Registration System to ensure flow of accurate information regarding maternal deaths.
- Local Government Department to provide information on the duties of Union *Parishad* members, Secretary, *Chowkidar* and *Dafadar* for registering maternal deaths accurately.
- Increase public awareness regarding the Birth and Death Registration Act, 2006.
- Allocate an allowance to *Chowkidars* for collecting information on maternal deaths and monitor their work to ensure their compliance.
- Monitor whether information of maternal deaths are recorded and compiled correctly at the *Upazila* level through *Upazila Nirbahi* Officer.
- Maintain coordination among members of Union *Parishads* and service providers in Union Health and Family Welfare Centres to ensure accuracy of number of maternal deaths
- Union *Parishad* and *Pourashava* to issue death certificates mentioning cause of death
- Engage Union Information Centres to register maternal deaths and preserve the records
- Activate, regularise meetings and make functional the Union *Parishad*’s Birth and Death Registration Standing Committees.

Naripokkho

Naripokkho, is a membership-based women’s activist organisation in Bangladesh working for the advancement of women’s rights and entitlements and building resistance against violence, discrimination and injustice. Naripokkho was founded in 1983.

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