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Star City

Making cops more pro-women

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Lucky (not her real name) was waiting at a police station with bruises all over her face.

She was trying for half an hour but could not lodge a complaint against her attacker. It all happened as she wanted to talk with a female police officer first for advice on her ordeal.



A woman police officer at work at the Motijheel Police Station. Photo: STAR

Since the only female police officer on duty was still unavailable after another half an hour there, she started to feel insecure and decided to leave the place without filing a case.

Lucky is a victim of domestic violence. Like most other victims of domestic violence, she also could not bring the culprits to justice.

In a groundbreaking move, UNDP has come forward with a project titled Police Reform Programme (PRP) to change this familiar scenario and turn the police force sensitive towards woman victims.

This new project has introduced a gender-specific guideline for the police and started to set up woman police units at all police stations to assist woman victims of various crimes.

LGED Adviser Anwarul Iqbal launched the gender guideline on November 20. The guideline was prepared through discussions with female victims, senior police officers, NGO representatives and other stakeholders.

The guideline has been sent to model police stations across the city and eventually the guideline will be implemented in all police stations of the city.

ASM Shahjahan, former inspector general of police and a senior adviser for the PRP project, said the objective of the programme is to make police comprehend the dimensions of violence committed toward women.

"There are many types of violence [that are committed against women] such as domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment at workplaces, especially at garment factories, etc. When a garment worker is harassed, she also loses her job. Police cannot get her a job, but they can help her come out of the trauma and get her confidence back in looking for a job," he said.

Shahjahan put emphasis on setting up of woman police units and increasing the number of female officers in order to implement the gender guideline successfully.

"At present, female officers represent only two percent of the total force. The official target is to increase it to five percent. I however [personally] think that it should be increased to at least 10 percent as soon as possible," he said.

"The biggest setbacks in increasing the number of female officers are the social mindset and lack of political will. The policy had not been pro-people as the politicians want to use police to beat up the opposition during demonstrations," Shahjahan added.

Fawzia Khondker, gender consultant of PRP, said the guideline intends to break the social norm of discouraging women from going to police stations or seeking help from the police.

"Lucky gave it a try. But in most cases, women actually do not even go to the police stations at all as going to police stations is socially unacceptable. Our goal, however, is to change this mindset by introducing the gender guideline to police and training them on how to deal with female victims," she said.

"Woman police units will be introduced to make sure that female victims and witnesses are interviewed by female officers and female suspects are interrogated by female officers. The FIR [first information report] of a rape victim should also be done by female officers," Fawzia added.

"We will train the officers in such a way so that even a sex worker feels comfortable while talking with the police. The officers will be trained on how to refrain from using offensive language and be compassionate toward rape victims," she said.

In most cases, rape victims feel comfortable by talking with a female police officer. But in reality, female officers are very few in number in most police stations and many police stations do not even have any female officer, Fawzia said. "At least three to five female officers should be appointed in each station."

However, it is not that easy to employ female officers in all police stations as the stations are riddled with various problems including shortage of suitable accommodation space for the female officers, she admitted.

A six-member committee comprising police officers, local representatives and a lawyer will be formed to monitor the implementation of the gender guideline at police stations. The committee will submit monthly or quarterly reports to officer in charge of a police station.

Currently, the overall monitoring is being done by the PRP monitoring committee. The formal monitoring of the six-member committees will

start from January.

A few victim support centres have already been opened at police stations and an awareness campaign is on to help people recognise women's rights to go to police stations and seek help from the police. The authorities also decided to include the gender guideline in basic and refresher training courses of police.