



# Now More Than Ever: Making the Case for Women’s and Girls’ Empowerment

## Findings from the CARE Learning Tour to Bangladesh

February 17-23, 2017

From February 17-23, a bipartisan group of House and Senate Congressional communications staffers traveled with CARE on a Learning Tour to Bangladesh to see firsthand the role that U.S. investments play in empowering women and girls to lift themselves out of poverty and be catalysts for change in their families and communities. Throughout the trip, the delegation witnessed how simple solutions – such as early education and small savings groups – can help ensure women and girls can thrive and reach their full potential. Over the past decade, Bangladesh has made significant development progress by reducing maternal and infant mortality, decreasing the poverty gap ratio and attaining gender parity at primary and secondary education. However, despite this progress, nearly one in three people live in poverty; discrimination against women, including gender-based violence and child marriage, continues to inhibit the country from reaching middle-income status. Our Learning Tour explored ways in which U.S. investments are helping to overcome these challenges.



*The delegation (from left to right): Front row: Rachael Leman, Katie Grant, Jamie Gellar, Haley Dorgan, Casey Contres, Gayatri Patel. Back row: Stephen Worley, Cassie Smedile, Rebecca Alery, Sarah Logan.*

### Participants

**Rebecca Alery**  
Communications Director  
Rep. Tom Emmer (R-MN-6)

**Casey Contres**  
Communications Director  
Rep. Bill Shuster (R-PA-9)

**Jamie Gellar**  
Deputy Communications Director  
House Foreign Affairs Committee Minority Staff

**Katie Grant**  
Communications Director  
Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD-5)

**Haley Dorgan**  
Press Secretary  
Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH)

**Rachael Leman**  
Senior Director of Citizen Advocacy  
CARE USA

**Sarah Logan**  
Communications Officer  
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

**M. Syambra Moitozo**  
Associate Producer  
VICE Media

**Gayatri Patel**  
Senior Policy Advocate, Gender  
CARE USA

**Cassie Smedile**  
Communications Director  
Senator Todd Young (R-IN)

**Stephen Worley**  
Deputy Communications Director  
Senate Appropriations Committee Majority Staff

## ► Day 1: Why Bangladesh? Setting the Context

### Scene-Setter Briefing with Local Technical Experts

The Learning Tour began in the capital city of Dhaka with a briefing by local technical experts, including Jamie Terzi, country director for CARE Bangladesh; Sheema Sen Gupta, deputy representative for UNICEF; and Bidyuth K. Mahalder, chief of party for the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Agricultural Extension Project. The panelists provided an overview of the current sustainable development challenges and successes in Bangladesh, including how the country continues to combat child marriage, keep girls in school and promote economic opportunities for women. The delegation learned that currently, two out of every three girls in the country will be wed before their eighteenth birthday, resulting in missed educational opportunities and early adolescent motherhood. The group also discussed the food security situation in Bangladesh and the challenges with malnutrition and stunting that disproportionately impact vulnerable Bangladeshi families and communities. As Mr. Mahalder pointed out

**“If you're serious about tackling food security, women's empowerment is key.”**

### Evening Briefing with U.S. Mission in Bangladesh

The delegation concluded the day with an evening briefing with the U.S. Mission to learn about the U.S. government's development priorities in Bangladesh. David Meale, deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy, spoke to the delegation about the efforts underway by the U.S. Mission to combat poverty and promote sustainable development in Bangladesh.



*The delegation attends an evening briefing with the U.S. Mission in Dhaka to hear more about the work underway to combat poverty and promote sustainable development.*

## ► Day 2: Empowering Women and Girls in Bangladesh

### Save the Children Girls' Education and Child Protection Program

The delegation began the day with a visit to Save the Children's Support Urban Slum Children to Access Inclusive Non-Formal Education (SUSTAIN) program in the Mirpur slum in Dhaka. This initiative aims to increase access to quality basic education in a safe learning environment for children in urban slums – particularly girls – who are out of school or who have never been in school, because most children are laborers. After they complete the required curriculum, they are mainstreamed into the formal government education system, where 94 percent of the students in this program pass their government entry exams.



*Casey Contres talks with students who are part of Save the Children's education program that aims to provide quality basic education for vulnerable children, particularly those living in slums.*

The group received an overview of the program from Sultan Ahmed, project director of SUSTAIN, who discussed some of the barriers children, especially girls, face in accessing quality education, such as child marriage and child labor. The delegation then sat down to observe learning in the classrooms. They heard from several girls in the community who shared their stories of how the program has positively impacted their lives and empowered them to understand their rights when it comes to health, education and safety.

### UNICEF Adolescent Club

Next, the group traveled from the capital city of Dhaka to Sylhet, a city located in the northeastern region of the country, where they visited an adolescent empowerment program led by UNICEF in Bangladesh. Presently, 25 percent of the population in Sylhet consists of adolescents. This program focuses on leveraging youth voices and advocacy to end child marriage and labor, promote health and hygiene and improve access to education and literacy. Since 2007, UNICEF has helped establish 300 youth groups throughout Sylhet, each including around 25 members aged 12-18. The delegation heard from Afroza Islam, chief of the field office for UNICEF, who described the goals of the program and the stipends they provide to adolescent girls to delay marriage until 18 years or older. Following the briefing, the delegation watched a drama performed by the youth group usually presented in open community spaces to spread awareness about the harmful effects of child marriage. When discussing the link between child marriage and early pregnancy, the youth group asked:

**“She’s still a child. How can she have a child herself?”**

### Community Clinic and Community Service Providers Program

Later that afternoon, the delegation visited a community service provider (CSP) program and Smiling Sun community health clinic in rural Sylhet, where more than 400 women die from pregnancy-related complications each year in this part of the country, compared to 170 per year overall in Bangladesh. Both the clinic and the CSP outreach and training are part of an NGO Health Service Delivery Project (NHSDP), which is a joint USAID and DFID initiative collaborating with hundreds of local NGOs, to expand access to quality maternal health and family planning services in Bangladesh. Presently, there are 11,000 satellite clinics throughout the country. The group was greeted by Dr. Hossain Jahangir, health program director for CARE Bangladesh, who shared more about the program and the challenging health context in Sylhet. The delegation visited two homes to see how the CSPs are providing educational outreach to mothers in the community to ensure they receive the appropriate prenatal and postnatal care. Presently, 42 percent of births in Sylhet are attended by a skilled birth attendant. Following these visits, the delegation toured the satellite health clinic in the village, which is the first of its kind to offer affordable preventative and basic health services to families in this community.



*A community service provider (CSP) in Sylhet who provides individual consultations to educate mothers in her community about comprehensive prenatal and postnatal care.*

### ► Day 3: Increasing Access to Health and Nutrition Services

The next morning, the delegation traveled to the Sunamganj district, located approximately two hours west of Sylhet city, to learn more about the work being done to increase access to health and nutrition services for women and families.

#### World Vision Positive Deviance/Hearth Program

The first site visit of the day was to a maternal health and child nutrition program, also referred to as the Positive Deviance/Hearth (PD/Hearth) program. This program, implemented by World Vision Bangladesh, aims to address the high levels of childhood malnutrition through trainings to mothers and caretakers, including home-based dietary interventions and nutrition education and rehabilitation of undernourished children. During the visit, the delegation heard from Bibhudan Biswas, program manager, who spoke of the role community mobilizers play in helping to address the challenges of access to health and nutrition services in Bangladesh.



*Cassie Smedile samples a dish that the mothers prepare for their children, which includes rice, vegetables, spices and egg.*

The delegation also heard from several members about the impact of the program in improving their understanding of proper nutrition and how to feed and care for their children; members have learnt about water and sanitation, breastfeeding and the importance of a diverse diet that includes vegetables and protein. The delegation learned that before the program, 30 percent of children in the community were malnourished with 44 children suffering from severe malnutrition. Now, only three years later, there are only 3 children identified in the community as battling severe malnutrition. The delegation sampled a dish that the mothers prepare for their children, which includes rice, vegetables, spices and egg.

### CARE's SHOUHARDO III Integrated Food and Nutrition Security Program

Later that afternoon, the delegation visited the SHOUHARDO III program, a five-year, USAID-funded project implemented through CARE Bangladesh that focuses on five key areas; agriculture, livelihoods, resilience, women's empowerment and governance. During the site visit, the delegation heard from Walter Mwasaa, chief of party of SHOUHARDO, who explained the goal of the program and the linkages between gender, food and nutrition security and economic empowerment. The delegation observed a simulation of the Village, Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) group, which empowers women to be economically self-sufficient; a program CARE pioneered in Niger 25 years ago.



*The delegation watches a simulation of the Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) group – a component of the SHOUHARDO III program – which aims to facilitate economic self-sufficiency for women in the community.*

The delegation then toured a rice paddy to see how SHOUHARDO is training smallholder farmers to increase their yields and heard from one farmer who, simply by changing his fertilizer regimen, doubled his yields last year. Following that visit, the delegation saw a food distribution process for families who are unable to produce enough nutritious foods to feed themselves, particularly because Sunamganj experiences extreme flooding and climatic shocks during more than half of the year.



*The delegation watches several girls in the Tipping Point program perform a debate on the consequences of child marriage.*

### CARE's Tipping Point Women and Girls' Empowerment Program

The delegation then visited CARE's Tipping Point project, which operates in 90 villages in Bangladesh to work with adolescent girls and boys, parents, communities and religious leaders to advocate against child marriage and violence against women and girls. During the site visit, the group heard from Rafiqul Islam, project manager for Tipping Point and Humaira Aziz, director of women and girls' empowerment at CARE Bangladesh, who provided an overview of the different forms of discrimination and traditional practices that affect girls' empowerment and women's safety in Bangladesh. Humaira also highlighted the importance of linking the program to the educational system and engaging communities and households to become involved with the program. The delegation also heard how the program develops leadership skills and provides the girls with information on why they should stay in school and avoid early marriage. Several girls who are part of the program shared their favorite activities with the delegation, including engaging in formal debate over contentious issues like dowry.

## ► Day 4: Promoting Women’s Rights and Empowerment

### Plan International’s Protecting Human Rights Program

On the last full day of the trip, the delegation had breakfast with participants in Plan International’s Protecting Human Rights (PHR) program, which aims to reduce domestic violence and related human rights abuses in Bangladesh. The delegation heard from several survivors about the role of the program and the positive impact it has had on recognizing their rights and seeking care. Today, more than 80 percent of Bangladeshi women and youth have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime and, as the PHR program demonstrates, women and survivors are critical advocates in changing this reality.

### Coffee Briefing with Influential Bangladeshi Women

After breakfast, the delegation returned to Dhaka and sat down with Christine Hunter, country representative for UN Women and Khushi Kabir, coordinator for Nijera Kori, for a discussion on how women’s participation in Bangladesh has evolved over the last decade. Christine highlighted the role that gender-based violence plays in hindering economic development and progress for women in Bangladesh. Christine said,

**“without gender equality, there is a ceiling on the level of growth and development that can happen in Bangladesh and around the world for women and girls.”**

Khushi then highlighted some of the challenges Bangladesh has witnessed in strengthening national political systems to promote women’s rights and political participation, but also the successes seen to date around education and improved maternal and child health outcomes.



*Khushi Kabir and Gayatri Patel speak to the delegation about the challenges for women and girls in Bangladesh, particularly concerning child marriage and gender-based violence.*

Khushi also discussed the ways gender-based violence and reduction of child marriage have been prioritized in Bangladesh, as well as the ways that international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) civil society groups and the Government of Bangladesh can continue working together to enhance women’s empowerment at the national and local levels.

### OIKKO Ready-Made Garment Factory Program

Following this meeting, the delegation visited the OIKKO (“Unity”) program, which focuses on developing the leadership skills of the traditionally marginalized and socially-excluded female garment workers in the Bangladesh ready-made-garment industry. These women are often underpaid and subjected to poor working conditions, harassment and long work hours. The project seeks to educate female workers about their fundamental rights through a leadership and workforce empowerment approach. To-date, the program has encouraged over 22,500 workers to learn about and advocate for labor reforms and better work conditions.



*Jamie Gellar meets a program participant and her daughter at the OIKKO Ready-Made Garment Factory program.*

The delegation spoke with Taher Abu, team leader for the OIKKO project, who explained some of the gaps and challenges garment workers face in terms of labor rights and access to services, including maternity leave policies, safe working conditions, overtime policies and advocating for fair wages. The delegation then heard from several female garment workers and participants in the OIKKO program who explained how through collective action and awareness raising they’ve achieved improvements such as additional bathrooms for workers, onsite child care and negotiating control over their wages with their families. The delegation also watched a simulation of the training they receive from peer educators.

## Dinner Reception with U.S. Ambassador, Local Government Officials and NGO Leaders

Lastly, the delegation attended a dinner reception with Marcia Stephens Bloom Bernicat, the U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, as well as local partners and NGOs in Bangladesh. During the reception, Ambassador Bernicat gave remarks and thanked the CARE Learning Tours' delegation for taking the time to visit Bangladesh and learn about the successes the country has seen in strengthening the health and agriculture sectors and what more can be done to continue to invest in Bangladesh's future and the health of its people. Next, Cassie Smedile gave remarks, where she thanked the U.S. mission for the work they have led, in collaboration with the Bangladeshi government and local partners, to reduce the incidence of child marriage, expand educational and economic opportunity for women and adolescents and reduce chronic malnutrition.



*The delegation speaks with Ambassador Bernicat at the reception with the U.S. Mission, local government officials and development partners in Bangladesh.*

## Conclusion

As the delegation saw, the need is great in Bangladesh for integrated programs that place women and girls at the center. In too many spaces, they continue to experience marginalization and discrimination and in too many instances, their voices are not heard. To address these challenges and build robust health and legal systems capable of providing comprehensive services that respond to the urgent needs of women and girls, Bangladesh will require renewed political will, additional and smarter use of existing resources and strengthened partnerships to help drive the country forward.

## Policy Recommendations

### Support Smart Foreign Assistance

U.S. foreign assistance is critical to building a stable and secure world. U.S.-funded programs produce real change in the lives of children and families living in extreme poverty and it saves lives during crises. By emphasizing self-reliance and sustainability, U.S. foreign assistance helps people help themselves.

One of the most important things the U.S. can do to fight global poverty is to devote sufficient resources to these programs and ensure the U.S. is coordinated and effective in its response. The International Affairs budget is just 1 percent of the total federal budget, yet it helps to feed millions, reduce mortality for women and children and enables the U.S. to respond to humanitarian crises, including environmental shocks, that cause food insecurity as we saw in Bangladesh. These investments also help keep America safe because development fosters stability, making it difficult for extremism to take root. While we recognize the significance of this difficult budget climate, CARE advocates for the U.S. to leverage its resources, coordinate its response and strengthen its support for the International Affairs budget and programming.

### Investments in Women and Girls

CARE advocates for the U.S. government to integrate gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment throughout its foreign assistance programs. By placing an emphasis on uplifting women and girls, by providing them with the basic tools they need to invest in themselves, their families and their communities, we can help communities sustainably lift themselves out of poverty. This, in turn, creates more stability and self-sufficiency at a national level and can help promote America's prosperity and security around the world. This can be done by creating strong policies and robust resources to promote women and girls' education and leadership, prevent child marriage, combat gender-based violence and foster food and nutrition security.

CARE supports The Reach Every Mother and Child Act, which will soon be re-introduced in the 115th Congress and leverages U.S. assistance to promote comprehensive health systems. The legislation improves how we provide lifesaving assistance by improving coordination and tracking results. It also improves what type of assistance we provide, ensuring women and children receive the proven, cost-effective interventions they need, such as vaccines, micronutrients and the resources to time and space pregnancies.

This bipartisan legislation, coupled with sustained adequate funding for implementation, would advance the U.S. government's priority of ending preventable maternal and child deaths by 2035. This is a meaningful and achievable goal that we need your support to accomplish.

CARE also supports the bipartisan International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA), which makes ending violence against women and girls a top diplomatic, development and foreign assistance priority. IVAWA focuses on preventing violence by transforming social norms; promoting political, legal and institutional reforms that recognize such violence as a crime and training police and the judiciary to both hold violators accountable and to respond to the needs of survivors; and reducing women and girls' vulnerability to violence by improving their economic status and educational opportunities.



*A mother and her child in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Over the past decade, Bangladesh has made significant development progress by reducing maternal and infant mortality and decreasing the poverty gap ratio.*



*Two out of every three girls in Bangladesh will be wed before their eighteenth birthday. The need for integrated programs that place women and girls at the center is critical to achieving lasting change.*

The International Affairs budget is the U.S. government's primary funding source for international programs for emergency response and long-term development. Although the International Affairs budget remains less than 1 percent of the overall U.S. budget, it is routinely targeted in budget cuts. An increasing concern is the continued erosion of base funding levels within the International Affairs budget, which has dropped to 2009 levels. In recognition of the critical role that U.S. foreign assistance plays in improving lives, CARE believes that there should be no disproportionate cuts to the international affairs budget. CARE also advocates for greater accountability and transparency of these funds.

If you are interested in learning more about CARE's Learning Tours program, please contact:

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