

# **‘Kishor-Kishori’ Club Funds Misappropriated**

**Ishtiaque Emon, Ekattor TV, March 3, 2023**

Thousands of complaints of irregularities have been received regarding the ‘Kishor-Kishori’ club project of the Department of Women’s Affairs. It was planned that 4.5 lakh teenagers from all over the country will practice culture in these clubs.

But after visiting more than 50 clubs in five districts, it was found that the club members get only one-third of the breakfast allowance allocated by the government. Most clubs were closed in some areas. There was a huge gap between the paperwork and the reality of the project everywhere.

In 2018, the Department of Women’s Affairs started this project to prevent child marriage, culturally develop the teens and teach them music, recitation and karate. According to the project, 4,883 clubs were established in every union and municipality of the country. The cost of this project was estimated at Tk 5.5 billion.

In every union and municipal school, on Friday and Saturday of every week the clubs are teaching 30 teenagers subjects based on the culture. A harmonium, tabla, carrom, ludo, chess and books worth Tk 5,000 and Tk 1,200 worth of magazines were provided to each club. Teachers were appointed daily to teach singing and recitation.

One gender promoter was assigned to five clubs. A field supervisor was in charge of the district. The number of field supervisors was increased to two in some districts where there were many clubs.

For club maintenance 128 motorcycles were given to supervisors in 64 districts. The project also provided the fuel costs for the vehicles.

This reporter went to Barguna, Patuakhali and Barisal districts to experience first-hand scenarios of the project.

The clubs were supposed to be active and open from 3-5 pm on Friday and Saturday. At 3 pm construction materials were seen stored in the club room at East Garjanbuniya Government Primary School in Barguna Sadar. At 4:15 PM, the reporter went to the Bashbunia Government Primary School in the neighbouring union and found the club closed.

One young passer-by said, ‘People come at their own time. At times 10 people, 5,6,7 people some other time. They come whenever they feel like.’

Not only in Sadar Upazila but most of the 20 clubs in four upazilas including Betagi and Amtali of Barguna district were also closed.

Those who remained open had very little presence of members, though the clubs had 30 members on paper. Members were allocated Tk 30 for snacks. In reality, they were getting snacks worth a maximum of Tk 10.

One member of the club said, 'They provide cookies and chanachur (Bombay mix)'.

When asked whether they get snacks every week, she answered, 'They started providing us the snacks recently. They gave us nothing today and yesterday.'

Barguna Women's Affairs Officer kept the reporting team waiting for three days. Her supervisor, a recital teacher from the club and an office assistant met the team.

Their visit seemed suspicious, and as a result, the meeting was recorded on a hidden camera. During the meeting, they wanted to bribe the reporter for not publishing the news.

Later, District Women's Affairs Officer Meherun Nahar Munni could finally be reached. She told the reporter that she could not meet due to illness from a stomach bug.

She added, 'Chairmen are always busy with their work. We send them letters when we call for a meeting. They are aware of the activities.'

But, the Chairman of the Deuli Subidhakhali Union of Patuakhali, Md. Anwar Hossain denied any knowledge of the existence of such clubs or their activities.

On camera, he called the District Women's Affairs Officer to enquire about the clubs.

'Is there any club named Kishor-Kishori? Where does it function?' He asked.

'I have been in the Union Parishad for the last one year. Why did you never mention the club?' Anwar asked on the phone in front of the camera.

The same scenario was observed in the clubs of Patuakhali district. The District Women's Affairs officer, Shirin Sultana also said that she could not speak as she was ill due to indigestion.

'I am suffering from food poisoning. I am having shivers and cannot talk', she said.

Tk 35 million is spent annually across the country for two meetings per year under the chairmanship of the concerned Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) to ensure that the clubs are managed properly.

The UNO of Barguna Sadar did not even know about the meetings. However, there was a meeting held only two months ago with his name on the paper. For the meeting, Tk 40 thousand was spent.

The UNO of Sadar upazila Md. Kawsar Hossain claimed never to receive any letters to attend such a meeting.

Md. Kawsar Hossain said, 'I do not know what to monitor as I do not receive any letters regarding the issue. They receive the letter. If they come to me and tell me about the meeting, only then I would be able to know. Otherwise, I can't know.'

He was speaking in front of two Women's Affairs Officers of Barguna Sadar and Betagi Upazila. Five UP chairmen from these upazilas were also present at that time.

They were supposed to attend the CMC meeting also. But none of them was aware of the activities of the club. In response to the question, why they did not know? Their answer was, as the Women's Affairs Officers did not inform them about the club, their activity and the meetings, they could not know.

Tk 30 is allocated for snacks for each of the 35 members of the club. The district field supervisor claimed that Tk 20 is spent for each member. But the school teachers said that they receive only Tk 10.

The field supervisor said, 'It was Tk 15 at first. Now it has increased to Tk 20 for the snacks.'

One of the local school teachers denied his claim. He said, 'Snacks were provided. But they stopped it for two months. They used to run the club for two days. Now it is only open for a day. They provide a dry cake worth Tk 10 as a snack.'

More than Tk 5 million is spent for 4,883 clubs daily only for this. In a month, Tk 41 million is spent on eight days of snacks.

If the clubs were not operating and members were absent then where did the money go? The reporter travelled to Agailjhila upazila of Barishal, 150 kilometres away from Barguna, to find the answer. The club over there had no activity for the last one and a half months.

One of the female student members of the club said, 'It used to be open on Saturday. Last month it was open for the last time.'

One of the teachers from the school also agreed with this. She said, 'The club do not have any activity since January. If it was open, we would have known.'

The local Women's Affairs Officer was not available for comments. But the accountant of the office Syed Nur e Alam said that despite having no activity, the entire amount was included in the expenditure.

Alam said, 'If there is some money left after spending, then it has to be sent back to the ministry. But the whole fund was spent.'

Apart from this, the Economic Relations Department found irregularities of Tk 2.65 million in 2022, in the procurement of cultural materials in various districts including Dinajpur, Kurigram, Rajbari, Bhola and Comilla.

In that same year, irregularities were also mentioned in their report regarding the withdrawal of Tk 9 million of the allocated Tk 40 million for snacks.

No action was taken against these irregularities and corruption. The Project Director and Assistant Project Director refused to comment on these issues on camera when we visited them at the Women's Department.

We had no choice but to record the discussion with the Assistant Project Director Liaqat Ali on a hidden camera. He had the excuse of a lack of manpower to monitor these irregularities.

When he was told that five upazilas were randomly visited and irregularities were found in all of those, can this be a coincidence? He replied, 'Can be. Maybe you were unlucky out or we are.'

The objective of the project is to help the teens develop mentally, socially and culturally. But the success of the project remains in doubt for a handful of corrupt officials.