

Women's rights champion featured in film

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Angela Gomes is the focus of a new documentary

Angela Gomes, a prominent advocate for women's rights in Bangladesh for nearly four decades, is the subject of a new film *The Guiding Light*, which screened in Dhaka on Monday.

Through her organization *Banchte Shekha* ("Learn how to survive") Gomes has offered support to poor, rural women with micro-credit programs, handicrafts and skills training, and anti-violence initiatives. The Catholic crusader won the Magsaysay award in 1999 and four national awards for her outstanding contributions to society.

Based in southwestern Jessore district, *Banchte Shekha* has 25,000 members in 40 areas. An estimated 200,000 women have been directly and indirectly helped by the organization, which Gomes founded in 1981.

"Angela Gomes is a living example in the field of women's rights and empowerment. She has continued changing lives of tens of thousands of poor and neglected women. With this film we want to

spread her life and ideals across the country and also in the world,” said Noor-E-Alam, the director.

The film will be shown in each of the country’s 64 districts and in other countries as well.

“For many years Angela Gomes has offered outstanding service to women. She has been humiliated and falsely accused of defying religious traditions,” said Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, a parliamentarian. “But I think what she has achieved up to now stands strong for her great deeds.”

Gomes said when she started her work, people threw waste on her, insulted her during village arbitrations and called her a prostitute.

“During my college studies I found violence against women was widespread. I decided to change the situation,” Gomes said.

In the conservative, patriarchal, Muslim-majority country, 75 percent of women face domestic violence; 95 percent of women don’t earn an income.

Advocate Sultana Kamal, a prominent rights activist said, “Angela Gomes is indeed a guiding light. She enabled poor and neglected women to become self-reliant and helped them live with dignity.”

Jaheda Begum, a Muslim woman, says Gomes gave her a new life.

“I faced serious physical and mental torture at home,” Begum said. “Angela Gomes helped me to avail justice. Though I couldn’t keep the family but I’ve learned to live on my own through handicrafts.”

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