



South Asia Regional Conference on Gender, Rights and Choices

Speakers assess status of access to justice in megacities and call for multi-sectoral interventions

[Dhaka, March 19, 2018] A two-day regional conference, titled 'South Asia Regional Conference on Gender, Rights and Choices: Access to Justice in a Megacity' began today at Nabab Nawab Ali Chowdhury Senate Bhaban at the University of Dhaka.

The conference is being jointly organised by the SHOKHI project (led by [the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust](#), with Marie Stopes Bangladesh, Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition, and the We Can Alliance to End Violence against Women) and the University of Dhaka, Faculty of Law, with support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Dhaka.

conference aims to share experiences about systems and processes for ensuring access to justice in megacities, particularly on gender-based violence, and to understand how multi-sectoral interventions on healthcare, social security, community solidarity building, livelihood and shelter can increase access to justice. The conference will also help build cross-regional learning, on technological innovations to strengthen access to justice and health, and successes in challenging or changing gender-discriminatory laws and practices.

Running on March 19-20, the conference has brought together lawyers, health practitioners, researchers, government officials, IT experts, service providers, paralegals, community health workers, community leaders and activists.

Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman, Vice-Chancellor, University of Dhaka was present as the Chief Guest and H.E. Leoni Margaretha Cuelenaere, Ambassador, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands was the Guest of Honour in the opening session.

The conference opened with a review of success stories and existing gaps pertaining to access to justice and services in megacities and highlighting legal empowerment initiatives.

In his remarks, chief guest Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman, Vice-Chancellor, University of Dhaka, emphasized the urgency to end gender disparity and ensure women's access to justice in the urban context. He expressed hopes that the conference would stimulate multidisciplinary innovations in the sector. Dr. Akhtaruzzaman discussed the role of universities and academic in combating gender inequality.

Addressing the conference, H.E. Leoni Margaretha Cuelenaere, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, said, ". Women and girls living in megacities are facing multidimensional challenges and are particularly vulnerable to violence closely linked with their access to health rights and choices. We are



committed to achieving gender equality and to ensure justice for all, noting that we are to leave no one behind. We are proud of our support to the Shokhi project whose changemakers and paralegals are making a difference in the lives of city dwellers, providing information, legal aid and health services”

The first session, ‘The Context of the City: Meeting Justice Needs and Gaps’ opened with remarks by Sara Hossain, Hon. Executive Director, BLAST, and was followed by a presentation on ‘Justice, Rights and Choices: Urban Context in Bangladesh’ by Dr. Ferdous Jahan, Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Dhaka. Barrister Faria Ahmed, gave a presentation on ‘SHOKHI’ One-Stop Health and Legal Services in the Community’.

Dr. Ferdous Jahan, Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Dhaka, said, “Services in the city are not expanding in comparison to the scale of urbanization and ensuring access to justice and services is difficult. There has to be a concerted effort and more initiatives from both the government and private sector to finance justice services, with NGOs needing to facilitate access to both the courts and alternative dispute resolution.”

Marlon J. Manuel, of the Global Legal Empowerment Network discussed legal empowerment movements, including while Dr. Kamal Hossain, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh shared remarks on ‘Lawyers and Social Justice’ followed by a speech by the guest of Guest of Honour H.E. Leoni Margaretha Cuelenaere, Ambassador, Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands. Dr. Md. Rahmat Ullah, Dean, Faculty of Law, University of Dhaka, as Chair, called for steps to involve students with community level programmes on and legal awareness and advice.

In his speech, Dr. Kamal Hossain recalling landmark judgments where the courts acted against unchecked abuse of power, to protect students, workers, and the homeless, said, “Law has immense power and has to be applied appropriately. If law is being used to create injustice, then we have a duty to act against that. and must to find a remedy. This needs to be our approach. A judiciary that operates independently will ensure the rights and welfare of the people and only then will people trust the law.”

The second session of the day focused on ‘Gender and Access to Justice in the City’, and was chaired by Justice Nizamul Huq, Chief Legal Advisor, BLAST and Former Justice, Appellate Division, Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

Panellists were Abeda Sultana, Deputy Director, National Legal Aid Services Organization; Farida Yasmin, Deputy Commissioner, Victim Support Centre, Dhaka Metropolitan Police; Dr. Bilkis Begum, Coordinator, One Stop Crisis Center, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs; Ibrahim Mia, of Madaripur Legal Aid Association and Dr. Borhan Uddin Khan, Professor, Department of Law, University of Dhaka.

Abeda Sultana, from NLASO said, “We are working to ensure access to justice countrywide, to raise awareness about legal issues and provide services to the poor and marginalized population through panel lawyers at courts, working in partnership with legal aid organisations.” Farida Yasmin spoke about extending services to all genders



The discussion covered multiple areas including accountable legal services for all, the role of lawyers, paralegals, universities and emphasized on the need for coordination between government and non-government organizations.

Ibrahim Mia, of Madaripur Legal Aid Association proposed , adoption of a law to set up a special court for citywide dispute resolutions, modelled on the village courts which deal with petty disputes in rural areas. .” Dr Borhan also called for greater engagement of students in the process of informal dispute resolution and justice delivery, including through the existing University Legal Clinic at Dhaka University.

The third session was on ‘Access to Healthcare, Livelihood and Shelter’ and was chaired by Dr. Sabina Faiz Rashid, Dean and Professor, BRAC JPG School of Public Health, BRAC University.

Panelists discussed initiatives for ensuring access to healthcare, livelihood and shelter. The panel was comprised of Dr. A.S.M Amanullah, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka; Dr. Ayesha Afroz Chowdhury, Gender, NGO and Stakeholder Participation Unit, Ministry of Health; Dr Julia Ahmed, Barrister Rashna Imam, Advocate, Supreme Court, Geeta Menon, of the Stree Jagruti Samiti, Karnataka, India, and Tanay Gandhi, of the Center for Social Justice, Ahmadabad, India. Geeta Menon asked “What kind of access can we have in context of extreme inequality, where caste and community operate as barriers? “ Rashna Imam spoke about ensuring the obligation of private and public hospitals to ensure emergency medical services and protection of ‘good samaritans’. Dr. Ayesha Afroza stressed the need for emergency services for survivors of gender based violence, and highlighted the protocol recently adopted by the Ministry of Health for such cases.

The fourth and closing session of the day discussed ‘Rights to Consent and Choice’ with panelists Humaira Aziz, of CARE-Bangladesh, Dr. Shahnaz Huda of the Dept of Law, and Dr. Gitiara Nasreen, Professor, Mass Communications and Journalism, University of Dhaka.

Chaired by Professor Dr. Md. Muzaherul Huq, Vice President, Indo-Pacific Association of Law, Medicine & Science (INPALMS), the discussion highlighted the importance of consent and choice in the context of reproductive health and rights, highlighting contradictions between the age of consent to sexual relationship and the age of consent to marriage as defined in existing criminal laws, family laws, and special laws against child marriage and violence against women and children

The expected outcome of the conference is to build knowledge on initiatives to strengthen access to justice, health care and rights in cities, with a focus on community empowerment, innovations and challenges to gender-discriminatory laws or practices.

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