



South Asia Regional Conference on Gender, Rights and Choices

Speakers call for an end to discriminatory laws and emphasize on regional cooperation

[Dhaka, March 20, 2018] A two-day regional conference, titled 'South Asia Regional Conference on Gender, Rights and Choices: Access to Justice in a Megacity' ended today at Nabab Nawab Ali Chowdhury Senate Bhaban at the University of Dhaka.

Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain, Hon'ble Chief Justice was present as the Chief Guest while Dr. Nasreen Ahmed, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic), University of Dhaka and Dr. Sri Krishna Deva Rao, Vice Chancellor (Academic), National Law University of Odisha were the Guest of Honour on the second and closing day.

Addressing the conference, Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain said, "Access to justice is a human right and the fundamental element of ensuring rule of law. Protection of human rights can only be granted by coordinated efforts of the stakeholders. In addition, regional cooperation, coordination, communication, sharing knowledge and experience will surely help assist the people of megacities to take shelter of law."

"In different courts of Bangladesh, 17,42,247 cases were filed in 2017. This figure shows that access to justice is increasing irrespective of gender. Government-sponsored legal aid scheme and NGO-based legal aid activities help assist the disadvantaged and vulnerable women to take resort to the court to justify their complaints and to have proper redress and remedy. Statistics reveal that of the 66,644 people who were provided with legal aid in 2017 from government fund, 29,882 were women. NGOs' contribution to the field is also commendable."

"Article 28 of the constitution prohibits discrimination on the ground of gender and declares equality of men and women in all spheres of the state and public life in clear and unequivocal terms. In addition, we have adequate laws to reduce violence against women. Judiciary of Bangladesh is highly sensitized about gender and justice. By its different judgements, the apex court issued directives to the government and other institutions to take appropriate action to reduce and prevent violence against women," Justice Mahmud added.

The conference opened with a discussion on 'Technology, Innovation, Health and Legal Services' where speakers focused on technological advancements and how it is enabling services to expand online and reach out to a wider audience for greater impact.

Chaired by Mujtaba Fiadul Haq, MD & CEO Shurjo Mukhi Limited, the discussion was conducted by a panel comprised of Dr. Ananya Raihan, Executive Chairperson, DNet; Dr. Saila Matin, Medical Lead, Maya Apa; Md. Tabaraka Ullah, Superintendent of Police, National Emergency Service 999; Tasnuva Ahmed, Head of Operations, Colours FM; Jayshree Satpute, Human Rights Lawyer, Co-founder, Nazdeek; Saila Ahmed, Research Officer, National Helpline Number 109, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs; Vashkar



Bhattyacharya, National Consultant (accessibility) A21, Prime Minister Office of Bangladesh and Shams Jaber, Founder of Tech Academy.

“The government initiated National Emergency Service in 2016 with an aim to unify the emergency services like police, fire brigade, and ambulance services. The service quality is gradually improving. Even though the service often becomes slow due to traffic congestion and different obstacles, we are working on ensuring quicker services,” said Md. Tabaraka Ullah.

The second session, ‘Addressing Discrimination in Laws, Policies and Procedure’, shed lights on the prevailing discriminatory laws and policies in Bangladesh and the necessities for reforming the laws for ensuring people’s access to justice. Upholding the roles of non-government organisations in challenging discriminatory laws and addressing the obstacles, the speakers stressed on coordination between government and non-government organisations to achieve reform and appropriate application of these laws and policies.

The session was chaired by Nurun Nahar Osmani, Member, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and participated by panellists Taslima Yasmin, Assistant Professor, University of Dhaka; Fatema Sultana Suvra, Assistant professor, Jagannath University; Dr. Muhammad Ekramul Haque, Professor, Department of Law, University of Dhaka; Farhtheeba Rahat Khan, Team Leader, Working with Women Project, SNV Netherlands Development Organization, and Shafiqul Islam, Country Director of ADD Bangladesh.

Farhtheeba Rahat Khan called for a holistic system to address grievances in the workplace and also within the community, and link these together to provide guidance, knowledge and solutions to the workers.

“If we want workers, specifically women workers to come and speak to us, we need to set up a counselling system in the workplace. All parties working to make the High Court directives on sexual harassment into a law should also push for mandatory counselling systems in workplaces in all sectors, and not just in RMG factories,” she added.

Shafiqul Islam talked about the disability issues saying, “Out of 10% disabled population in the country, 77% are women. Disability issues, especially women disability, are not addressed in law which makes women even more deprived of justice. Women with visual impairments cannot identify the criminals and with hearing impairments cannot tell criminals name and justice often go unserved as sign languages are not used in the courts. We need to work out how to make the laws accessible and comprehensible to people with disabilities.” The third session was on ‘Building Networks and Alliances for Greater Impact’ and was chaired by Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Member, NHRC. Speakers emphasized on bringing together regional and national experts to build a network which can work collectively towards a common goal and achieve greater impact on regional level.

Akhi Akter, Changemaker, Shokhi; Farah Kabir, Country Director, Action Aid Bangladesh; Sharif Mostafa Helal, Executive Director, Bangladesh Women Health Coalition; Maheen Sultan, Member, Naripakkho; Zakir Hossain, CEO, Nagorik Uddyog; Mushfiqua Zaman Satiar, Senior Adviser- SRHR and Gender, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Shaheen Akter Doly, Executive Director, Narimoitree were the discussants in the session.



The fourth and closing session, 'Access to Justice, Empowerment and Equality' opened with a presentation by Dr. Shahnaz Huda, Professor, Department of Law, University of Dhaka followed by speeches from Dr. Nasreen Ahmed, Dr. Sri Krishna Deva Rao, Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain and Dr. Naima Huq, Chairman, Department of Law, University of Dhaka.

In her remarks, Dr. Nasreen Ahmed said, Discourses on women and especially so in Bangladesh mostly deals with rural women. With rapidly growing urbanization worldwide, focus on urban woman has thus become imperative. Rapid urbanization puts an enormous pressure on the existing infrastructure and basic facilities. One person in every three lives in numerous slums in Dhaka. City dwellers are accustomed to seeing streams of women in the morning and evening. They are forced to live in areas that are congested with no facilities."

"With religion in the hands of illiterate preachers who misinterpret religion, and mistreat women, and anti-women attitudes in society, women face obstacles which are difficult to overcome without institutional help. Women face multiple forms of violence and deprivation remains high, and these are issues which needs to be addressed," she added.

Dr. Naima Huq, in her closing remarks, said, "We know about the practical scenario of the urban poor women: they are the poorest among the poor. BLAST and all other organizations should come forward to collaborate to solve different issues of consent, right, choices, and discrimination. The nature of struggle of women is not constant and it evolves over time. The conference helped us appraise the current scenario in the region."

Bringing together government and non-government workers, experts, researchers, paralegals, community leaders and academics, the conference, running on March 19 and 20, aimed at sharing knowledge and experiences on innovations and technologies in a bid to strengthen access to justice, healthcare and rights in megacities and alleviate gender discriminatory laws, policies and practices.

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.

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