

Towards advancement of women

Over the years, women's access to education and proper healthcare has increased, their participation in the paid labour force has grown and legislation that promises equal opportunities for women, and respect for their human rights has been recognised. Still, discrimination against women remains, especially in the developing countries like ours. The government has already affirmed its commitment to the issue through some commendable measures, but a lot of work needs to be done, writes **Dr Nazmunessa Mahtab**

EMPOWERMENT and autonomy of women and improvement of their political, social and economic and health status is an important end in itself. Full participation and partnership of both women and men is required in productive and reproductive life. It is essential for achievement of sustainable development (UNFPA, 1996).

Discrimination against women is still widespread. In most regions of the world, women receive less formal education than men, and at the same time women's own knowledge, abilities and coping mechanisms often go unrecognised. Violence against women remains a global phenomenon. There is strong barrier to women's advancement in government, politics and business.

Over the past 20 years, World Conferences on Women – held in Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing – have contributed to progressive strengthening of legal, economic, social and political dimensions of the role of women. Women's access to education and proper healthcare has increased, their participation in the paid labour force has grown and legislation that promises equal opportunities for women, and respect for their human rights has been recognised (PFA, 1995).

International conferences, held during the last decade of the 20th century, such as the UN Conference on Environment and Development (1992), the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (1994), the World Summit for Social Development (1995), have all highlighted various outstanding issues related to the improvement of the status of women. From each of these global conferences emerged a more powerful recognition of the crucial role of women in sustainable development and protection of the environment; of the rights of women as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights; of health, maternal care and family planning facilities, and of access to education and information, as essential to the exercise by women of their fundamental rights (PFA, 1995).

The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, adopted unanimously at the fourth World Conference on Women by representatives from 189 countries, reflected a new international commitment to the goals of equality, development and peace for women everywhere. The Platform for Action is a powerful agenda for empowerment of women. It called for integration of gender perspectives in all policies and programs. It focused on concrete measures to address the critical areas of concern worldwide (PFA, 1995).

The Platform, divided into six chapters, identified 12 critical areas of concern, considered to represent the main obstacles to women's advancement. It defined strategic objectives and spelled out actions to be taken over the next five years by governments, the international community, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector for the removal of existing obstacles.

The Platform was further reinforced in the Beijing Declaration. It reaffirmed the commitment of governments to eliminate discrimination against women and to remove all obstacles to equality. Governments also recognised the need to ensure a gender perspective in their policies and programs.

The Bangladesh scenario

Women constitute about one half of the population of 126 million people in Bangladesh. They represent half of the country's resources and half of its potential. Hence it is recognised that development objectives such as accelerated economic growth, poverty alleviation and employment creation cannot be achieved without contribution and participation of women. Among various development issues, 'women in development' is recognised as a priority issue. Efforts are, therefore, underway to bring women into the mainstream of development. The process of promoting women's participation in development received significant importance in the Fourth Five Year Plan (1990-1995) as it stated: *women into the mainstreaming of development has been taken as one of the major strategies of FFYP ... (paragraph 8.1)*

The government of Bangladesh endorsed both the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994) and the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) without any reservation. Both these documents contain recommendations that are basic to the survival sustenance and advancement of women. The follow-up for implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action prepared in 1996 highlighted measures to be adopted to reduce maternal mortality, improve women's reproductive health and reduce fertility. The government is also committed to ensuring the implementation of PFA at national level. The PFA emphasises the strategy of mainstreaming of women's development into government policies and programmes. It states: *and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes so that before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of their effects on women and men, respectively (paragraph 202)*

All these statements not only indicate the commitment of the government towards women's development but also highlight its view of women's development as an integral part of the responsibilities of all line ministries. All ministries and agencies of the government have definite responsibilities for women's development because women are a major part of the total population that each agency exists to serve.

After five years of the Beijing Declaration all the 189 countries are working to review the performances on their commitment the advancement of women. This paper presents a descriptive overview of the institutional mechanisms developed by the government, NGOs, women's organisations and women academics for advancement of women.

If we go through the Beijing Declaration we find that institutional mechanism for advancement of women has been identified as one of the strategic objectives. In this regard, emphasis has been placed on:

A national machinery for the advancement of women is the policy-coordinating unit inside government. Its main task is to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas. The necessary conditions for an effective functioning of the national machinery include institutional mechanisms or processes that facilitate, as appropriate, decentralised planning, implementation and monitoring with a view to involving non-governmental organisations and community organisations from the grass roots upwards (paragraph 201(b))

In addressing the issue of national machinery for the advancement, the ministry of women and children's affairs has been designated as the lead ministry for the follow-up and implementation of the PFA. All ministries and agencies are required to integrate equality measures in their different plans, programmes, and policy packages. Two mechanisms for inter-sectoral co-ordination that are considered to be part of the national machinery for women's development are the National Council for Women's Development (NCWD) and the WID Focal Point Mechanism. Another major co-ordination mechanism is the Inter-ministerial Advisory Committee for the Central Cell for the Prevention of Oppression against Women and Children.

National Council for Women's Development (NCWD)

A 44-member National Council for Women's Development (NCWD) has been established consisting of Ministries and Secretaries from several line ministries, public representatives and eminent individuals with the prime minister as the head of the council.

The responsibilities of NCWD are: i) formulation of rules and regulations for the development work of different ministries, divisions and other agencies and co-ordinate them to ensure women's participation in socio-economic development work; ii) formulation of laws and regulations to ensure women's legal rights and development and to prevent of oppression against women; and (iii) adoption of measures to preserve women's interests in all areas in which women are active and ensure their participation and advancement.

Parliamentary standing committee for MWCA

A 10-member parliamentary standing committee is functioning to review activities of the ministry of women and children affairs on a regular basis.

Inter-ministerial Co-ordination and Evaluation Committee

The National Policy for Women's Advancement envisages the establishment of an Inter-ministerial Co-ordination and Evaluation Committee headed by the minister for women and children's affairs to monitor progress of implementation of sectoral WID plans and programmes and submit quarterly progress report to the NCWD. Various government and non-government women's development organisations and ministries with WID Focal Points are members of this committee.

Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MWCA)

The MWCA is regarded as the nodal ministry for facilitating the tasks designed for the advancement of women. Its role focuses on national policy formulation and implementation of all programmes undertaken for the betterment of women in the society, especially addressing the needs of the rural poor, distressed, disadvantaged and deprived women; registration and co-ordination of women's voluntary organisations, collaborating with other agencies working on women's development issues and maintaining links with the international/donor agencies for women's development in the country. Furthermore, the ministry is actively involved in the follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC) and the National Policy for the Advancement of Women.

WID focal points in different ministries

Since the fourth Five-Year plan all the sectors and ministries are responsible for incorporating women in development concerns into their development programmes in order to mainstream women's development. At present 47 WID Focal Points (WIDFP) and 47 Associate WID Focal Points in ministries/departments/agencies are responsible for overseeing the concerns of women in the programmes of their respective min-



Women have become increasingly vocal over the years for protection of their rights

istries. They are responsible for formulating sectoral plans keeping in mind gender concerns, preparing lists of priority projects for women for inclusion in the annual development plans; reviewing and modifying ongoing projects with a view to incorporating adequate gender concerns in the sectoral programmes/projects; ensuring gender sensitive reporting system; collaborating with other sectors and central agencies in order to achieve WID sectoral goals; and monitoring and reporting on their sectoral activities and constraints in achieving these goals.

Department of Women Affairs

This is the implementing arm of the ministry of women and children affairs. It operates through its headquarters at the national level and field-based offices located at the district and thanas. At the time of establishment in 1974, DWA offices were set up in 22 Districts and 160 thanas. At present the offices have been extended to cover all the 64 Districts and the thana offices have been extended to include another 100 thanas making a total of 260 thanas. However, as per recommendation of the Public Administration Reform Commission 1996, all the thanas will be covered in phases. This department is implementing all the projects/programmes/ activities related to women's issues and also working for the dissemination and implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP), National Policy for the Advancement of Women and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

WID co-ordination committee at the district and thana levels

One important point to mention here is that all these bodies are established at the national level and they are responsible for overseeing the concerns of women in the programmes of their respective ministries at the national level only. Thus with a view to implementing and monitoring women's development programmes by the national departments/agencies and the NGOs at the regional and local levels and formulating development plans at the national levels based on needs assessment of the grass root levels, establishment of WID co-ordination committees at the district and thana levels was important.

The WID co-ordination committee was established as an activity of the WID component of the project "strengthening the Management Capability of the Department of Women's Affairs". The process of establishing the WID co-ordination committee at the district and thana levels started in March 1997 when a baseline survey was conducted in five district towns of Dhaka, Barisal, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna and three thanas in each of the districts.

All activities related to the establishment of WID co-ordination committees at the district and thana levels have been completed. In this perspective, an order has been issued on December 10, 1998, and circulated by the Cabinet Division to all the districts and thanas in Bangladesh to form these committees. The Deputy Commissioner at the district and the thana nirbahi officer (TNO) at the thana will chair the committees at their respective levels, while the women's affairs officer at the district and thana will act as the member-secretary and there will be 18 other members represented by officers of different government departments, local government officials, NGOs, members of professional groups, civil society and the community.

The establishment of the WID co-ordination committees makes it evident that government's policy statement reaffirmed its aim that development activities reach the grassroots level and

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also called for monitoring of WID aspects in ongoing development programmes from the national to the regional and local levels.

However, only institutional structures are not enough to conduct the work required to bring about women's development. It is essential that these institutions be staffed by competent and efficient personnel committed to carry on the tasks put forward for them. With a view to strengthening the institutional mechanisms, increase the leadership capability and work efficiency of the concerned officials necessary for the advancement of women the government has implemented the following three projects:

1. Policy Leadership and Advocacy for Gender Equality (PLAGE)

This is a high priority project and a joint initiative of Bangladesh and Canada. It is implemented by the ministry of women and children affairs (MWCA) with financial assistance from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The activities of PLAGE focus on strengthening the planning and policy unit of MWCA, enhancing the role of WID Focal Points, capacity building of the Planning Commission, maintain and strengthen linkages with NGOs, women's organisations, members of the civil society, human rights organisations, professional groups, academia and the media.

2. Strengthening the management capability of the department of women affairs

This project is being implemented by the department of women's affairs and assisted by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). The activities of the project are concentrated in the five district headquarters of Dhaka, Barisal, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi and three thanas selected randomly from each of the five districts. The purpose of the project is to strengthen the management capability of the DWA officials working at the national, district and thana levels; develop a MIS system for the ministry of women and children affairs; and strengthen the institutional mechanism at the field level through the establishment of WID co-ordination committee at the district and thana levels.

The activities of the WID co-ordination committee consists of holding Committee meetings every two months to review the

work on women's development undertaken by each of the government departments working at the district and thana levels. As far as the work of the project is concerned, activities are undertaken to impart training to the members of the WID co-ordination committee members on WID issues, gender policy of the government, dissemination of National Action Plan, National Policy for the Advancement of Women, CEDAW and other relevant topics related to women's development and concerns.

One important point worth mentioning here is that although the activities of the project are confined to the five districts and fifteen thanas, the proposed WID co-ordination committee has been established in all the 64 districts and 460 thanas of the country. This is definitely an affirmative action of the government in strengthening the institutional base for women's development.

However as the work of the project is limited to only five districts and fifteen thanas, and the project period will end in June 2000, it is extremely essential for the MWCA/DWA to take urgent measures for replication of this activity so that all the remaining districts and thanas could be covered under the project and strategies may be adopted to conduct training programs for the WID co-ordination committee members. This will help enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of all those concerned with women's development issues at the grassroots level.

3. Capacity building for local governance project

This project is being implemented by the National Institute of Local Government with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Although the project aims at building the capacity of the local government units in the country, one of the important components focuses on strengthening the capacity of the women members of the union parishes. Through the implementation of this project the government is increasing the participation of the women members in politics and decision making and thus enhancing the capability of the women through strengthening the institutional base at the grassroots level.

Ngos and their role in institutional development

Like the government, there are several NGOs who have responded with a great deal of vigour and commitment to increasing the contribution of women to the development process. New women's organisations have been established and older ones have increased their levels of organisational units, activities and assertiveness in support of strengthening the position of women in Bangladesh.

As a follow up of the Beijing Conference many women's organisations and NGOs have adopted strategies to incorporate gender issues in their scheme of activities geared to women's development and empowerment. Among different strategies adopted by them, micro-credit for poverty alleviation and gender-training programmes have become institutionalised.

Various research studies conducted on the Grameen Bank, BRAC, PROSHIKA, BRDB, and other NGOs involved in micro-credit programs have indicated that these micro-credit programs have gradually been transformed to play the role of micro-credit institutions for the alleviation of poverty. In this regard, Palli Karma Shahayak Foundation (PKSF), through its scheme of providing micro-credit to by small NGOs has also established itself as a successful institution for poverty alleviation.

Almost all NGOs, big and small, have a Gender Policy for their organisations and have established a separate unit for the conduct of activities incorporated within the gender policy. The areas of concentration include violence against women, human rights (including training and advocacy related to CEDAW), political participation and empowerment, health (especially reproductive health), and the issues related to the girl child.

Institutionalisation of women's studies in Bangladesh

Planning for introduction of women and development studies at Dhaka University officially began in 1986. Women's studies as a formal area of teaching and research in Bangladesh emerged around 1987 at Dhaka University, more or less simultaneously in three departments under the faculty of social sciences. These are the Departments of Political Science, Sociology and Public Administration. During the 1990s, this initiative received an added impetus with the introduction of women's studies courses in some other departments, like International Relations and Anthropology.

Other Universities in Bangladesh, e.g. the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) has a separate course on gender and development that includes courses on women's issues and problems have been started since the 1970s. As a pioneering initiative, the Women for Women, Research and Study Group, commenced their work by conducting research on the *Status of Women in Bangladesh* published in 1975. This was followed by another publication on the *Situation of Women in Bangladesh* in 1979. The research was conducted by members of Women for Women who are all academicians interested in women's issues. A number of individual high-profile women have emerged in such areas as education, research, politics, law, and business as significant leaders in articulation of women's concerns and establishment of gender consciousness. Thus as an important aspect of the Beijing Conference the academic recognition for women's studies as a discipline, of bringing women to the forefront of academic analysis and scholarship and reconstituting its priorities has been felt to be valid and crucial. With this objective some of the women professors at different departments of the social science faculty, Dhaka University, had taken the initiative of setting up a separate Department of Women's Studies. The process started in November 1997, and passing through all the various levels of decision making it has reached the final stage of implementation only after the financial implications have been ensured from different international agencies, donor organisations committed towards the cause of women's development in Bangladesh.

Thus with all the concerted efforts of establishing the various institutional mechanisms by the government, NGOs, women's development and concerns could be addressed in an integrated and holistic approach. It is also very important for providing effective co-ordination essential for implementing all the policies, plans, projects and programmes that the government has undertaken for the advancement of women in Bangladesh.

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It is imperative that they be protected against discrimination

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