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Sultana Kamal
Executive Director
Ain-o-Salish Kendra
Former Advisor

We would like to thank the organizers of this round table conference, PRIP Trust, Oxfam, and The Daily Star. Heather, the representative of Oxfam GB is present here and I would like to thank Heather for being with us for a long time and I would like to thank to all who are present here for this occasion. I do not want to speak much about the PRSP. However, I think PRSP has failed to relate with people's lives and therefore, we are witnessing the problem of building a framework. As a result we have to admit that after so many years we know so little about PRSP. If I remember correctly, I participated in a PRSP conference and found that PRSP had no linkage or relation with our 5-Year Plan; neither had it had any relation to the MDGs. Actually, we are producing instruments like PRSP and MDGs and these instruments have no links or relation to each other. More importantly, we are not sure why we are producing such documents and where are we heading with these sort of documents and it is getting us nowhere. I believe this is why PRSP is so much under criticism now.

Another important point that I would like to mention is when we discuss any issue with the politicians, we raise it because the politicians have the capacity to change things and, more importantly, people have voted them for such changes. We do not have the political power, neither do we have the authority for any change; we can only raise issues through them. So, we expect response instead of reaction. There is a difference between reaction and response; and we see that whenever we raise any issue, we only get reaction and do not get any response.

We do not want any defensive reaction either. We are the citizens of this country and we understand the limitations and the difficulties in getting a proper response on any issue. With such a huge population and limited resources, we are always working together in spite of the various factors that are interplaying, not to mention the different opinions that also have to be considered in the process. It is also true that in a democratic process, there will be different opinions and we are open to taking different courses. Sometimes, what may seem confusing may actually be a way for us. What we can expect from the learned politicians is to show us the right way.

Who should show us the right way? It is the politicians who are responsible for showing us the right way and we put our faith in them for that responsibility. An important issue that has been raised several times in the recent past is that some of the political forces get funds. But how do they get those funds? If you take our organization, Ain o Salish Kendra, as an example, we receive funds from outside and we have to report each and every taka that we spend. Those who are engaged in religious political activism do not have to report their expenditures. It is the responsibility of the government to look into this issue of accountability of those religious political parties. How come they receive so much funding and monies? How are they able to carry out so many activities? These have been clearly mentioned by Ayesha apa. Who is responsible for promoting these consistent antagonistic forces? Who will develop the condition for taking such responsibilities?

At present, we are witnessing a dangerous trend in our society. It is being propagated by these forces so that all the girls wear hijab. I would like to mention that those who wear hijab make their choice and those who do not wear hijab equally make their choice. I have talked to many girls who mention that only if they wear hijab their parents permit them to go out of their houses. They also say that if they wear hijab, they feel safe in their workplace and from the eve teasers. Part of the impact of hijab is it is a license for movement. If something goes wrong with a girl without hijab, the parents or peers would blame it on the girl for not wearing one. If you wear hijab you may be safe, actually that becomes a norm or a standard. If the politicians are vocal on these issues, then only we might be able to stop these.

Different political parties, like Awami League and other political parties, are saying that we have not been informed about PRSP. My question is: why should they not know? I think if all had voiced their opinion there would be no problem on this issue; if not you become alone. If Parliament had been the actual centre for such discussions, we would have been relieved of many problems. However, it is not expected to come soon. Maybe one of the political parties has a majority in Parliament now; what if they do not have a majority in the next term?

The politicians have been given responsibility and for this the people are paying taxes for that service from which you enjoy certain benefits. This is the people's way of respect and there is a value with it. We expect you to keep this respect and there is no question of confrontation involved in it. There are expectations from you similarly. It is obvious that we would like to receive from you too since we have given you so much. Our expectation is there for nothing. We expect because we have given you.

I repeat again that there is no question of confrontation. One of the discussants mentioned that we always blame the politicians. May I humbly inform you that I blame the politicians for many reasons. At present we are in a peculiar state of governance where nobody knows who is responsible for running the country. Is it the Chief Advisor, DGFI, or the army?

Those who are out of jail on bail still have charges against them, but they are behaving like heroes. The new heroes on the block should remember that they are on bail only and the court did not dismiss those charges against them. The situation of the country went from bad to worse because of the fault of some politicians and those who are at fault don't

think that they are guilty. Therefore, they should be careful in the future.

Khondokar Ibrahim Khaled
Chairperson
Bangladesh Krishi Bank

We should admit that by keeping women out of politics and PRSP, it is an historical incident that the women are lagging behind. When we look at the free society or developed countries, like America, we see that the rights for women to vote came less than 100 years ago, similar to Europe. But from day one, we have taken advantage of women. I did not mean men when I stated the word "we", what I meant was we as men and women both. In a population of 15 crore, when I say "we", it does not refer to us as people but as a nation.

It is a historical event that when we speak about human development, the women are behind and we need to come out of this situation. I want to emphasize why it is so that women are falling behind. There is where the problem lies. This is where the Americas and Europe had to pull up the women, and we have to do so. But I think we are in a more advantaged position than they were. We are not lagging behind than they were, rather we are more ahead than they were. We want to separate the political, economic, and social issues into two. On these issues we have to take legal measures, while with the others, legal or cultural actions won't suffice, the people have to accept that.

If the people think it is illogical, people do not want to accept the law. Therefore, everything can't be done through law only. So, women's development is not a question of laws only. Female education is free up to grade eight and I think it should be made legal as well and every one should be brought into the schools. I think education is the first right for women.

There are a lot of developed countries, Singapore being the nearest to us. There are laws that if after marriage the husband buys a house, the wife owns one-third of the house. One other issue, which needs further thought, and I think will be difficult, is for women to have equal share of property. We don't have sharia law here, we can do it personally. If I like to speak on this issue here, the religious leaders will become violent and say that I am against religion. This equal distribution of wealth for men and women can be brought about slowly. Another issue is, if we force human rights, women rights will be developed automatically. Where there is a violation of human rights, there is a violation of women's rights as well. I think through this violation of human rights, both men and women are deprived of rights on a regular basis.

We should be uplifting the women and for that the quota system should be increased for women. After the liberation of Bangladesh, women's jobs in the government were increased through quota system and we have already had benefits from that. Currently the quota for women regarding government jobs is 15%; it should be increased to 20.25% and this percentage should keep on increasing. Though this is done through laws, what we don't do is implement those laws.

When we want to change the norms of culture, it can't be done through laws alone. This should be practiced and law can help this practice, but this should be mandatory. I think those who want their rights to be established, should take their own initiative. Otherwise it will be difficult to achieve rights. For example, when labour rights had to be established, the labourers themselves had to fight for them. So, when women want to establish their rights, they have to fight for them; men or political parties won't do that for them, it is not logical. This should start from the ground level, from the villages they should be organized for it and have a formal organization without which their rights cannot be established. I would like to suggest that those of you who are with various organizations should be active through your organizations and it would be a big step forward for women.

Newspapers are an important medium to change culture. A lot of news is not covered in the newspapers, like social abuse, among which violence against women is a big issue. I think this is an example of social decadence. Therefore, wherever these incidents happen, the women's organizations, the political parties and civil society should be present here. We still read in the newspapers about fatwa and hilla marriages which are illegal. How many of us have come forward to mitigate or prevent those? We thank the newspapers for this news. However, if we, the women's organizations, and the political parties come forward on these issues, it will create a different impact.

Motia Chowdhury
President, Member
Bangladesh Awami League

I would like to thank the organizers of the seminar on economic and political empowerment of women as citizens and stopping violence on the basis of PRSP.

The political parties were not involved when the first PRSP was prepared and not even during the second PRSP. I do believe that in democracy parliament is the center of all decision-making. Unfortunately, PRSP was not discussed in parliament. So our main politicians are not committed to own it. In one of the research papers the CPD said that an additional 40 million people have gone under poverty because of price hike of essentials. As a result, poverty is increasing rather than reducing. After that, what we will do to formulate the second PRSP? I think the donors, consultants, civil societies and NGOs have benefited from the PRSP, not the general body of people.

Another point is about women's health. The slogan of women's reproductive health is very popular now. It means, to my mind, that women should not have other health such as kidney disease or blood pressure or diabetes. If women are suffering from those diseases they should be taken care of. Naturally women have reproductive ability. For that reason, they should be given extra care. But as human beings women should have the right to

demand proper health measures. So our fundamental rights as enshrined in the Constitution, such as food, clothing, housing, medical care and education, have to be fulfilled for every citizen. If we can formulate the economic, social, political policies to ensure these rights, we do not need the PRSP.

Our general people know nothing about PRSP.

I think PRSP has failed to carry any positive result. After exercising it for about a decade, we see that an additional 40 million people have come under poverty. Moreover, if the educated do not know even the abbreviation of PRSP let alone the general people. So why do we start the second phase of PRSP? Why do we dissipate our time with meetings or seminars about it? I suggest that you should pressurize the political parties to be committed to meeting the fundamental rights of the people before the coming election.

Civil society and NGOs have the right to do it. This demand should be raised at all levels of society. You should do massive campaign to awaken the people rather than follow the instructions of donors. You should monitor the representatives who are being elected, see how much they are fulfilling their commitments after forming the government. I can say on behalf of my party, we were unable to fulfill many things, but we made the country independent, we tried to establish non-communal politics and still we are struggling to do it. And we were the first to recruit women in the defence services.

We are trying hard to increase women's participation in light of reality. In our presidium there are three women leaders apart from the president of the party. Moreover, we have many female secretariat and central committee members. If possible we will reserve 33% seats for women in the coming election. Lastly, I am requesting again to go forward on our own and ignore foreign prescriptions. In this way we can ensure the progress of the nation.

Shirin Akhter

Vice President
Jatio Samajtantrik Dal
President, Karmajibi Nari

Thanks to Oxfam, The Daily Star, and PRIP Trust for organizing the discussion session. This type of discussion has been going on for a long time in Bangladesh. The women are working and they are working very hard, that does not mean that the political parties are not working. I have an advantage. I am, on the one hand, engaged in a women's organization and, on the other hand, I also belong to a political party. I have positioned myself in the decision making process of this political party. I believe that that the political, social and cultural organizations can come on one platform. We should build such a relationship so that we feel we are on the same platform. Whenever we sit with other political parties and other organizations there seems to be some differences. Unless and until these differences are sorted out, we won't be able to reach our goal.

Poverty reduction is our firm commitment. Recognizing this, we want to say some thing on PRSP on the basis of our commitment. To reduce poverty in Bangladesh we should take the 5-Year Plan and the other short-term and long-term measures rather PRSP. Then I believe, we will be able to achieve our goal of poverty reduction. Secondly, it seems like that 'development' is only women centered. Development and poverty reduction that is, all development is concentrated around women. However, women in Bangladesh are not only poor; there are poor men as well. In the present economic condition and the wealth that is being accumulated as a result of increased GDP, but the problem is that the difference between the rich and poor is increasing along with it. If we don't address this problem, all our efforts in poverty reeducation will fail. Therefore, if we talk about poverty reduction in PRSP, then we should create employment for the women.

Thirdly, we should identify the areas where terrorism is committed against women and preventing women from their rightful work and decision-making. We should recognize and respect the work and the labor involved in women's work like the slogan, "Work yes, but with dignity". When there is no dignity in women's labour, it is an injustice for a woman. Along with this we should make sure that the working environment for women is friendly.

A few minutes back in this auditorium, I heard an interesting discussion on the political parties, especially the left parties, who talk about equality. We observe more women members in those political parties who are moderate, democratic, and progressive. In the left political parties, due to the lack of qualified women, they are not in the decision making process, but are only seen at the front of the political professions. What seems to be the problem here? My experience on the basis of working in two different organizations tells me that there is only one problem. We don't care about women.

We know that women are disadvantaged and if they can progress one step that can be considered as a victory.

So, I would like to add that those who respect women's independence should work together for a movement towards progress. Then women's rights will be ensured; poverty reduced, and a place created for evaluating women as true human beings.

Rashed Khan Menon

President
Bangladesh Workers Party

Let me start by thanking everyone here, specially the organizers of this workshop. I can't say much about the PRSP however; I attended a few discussion meetings on it. This PRSP doesn't belong to us as it was not prepared by our policy makers. Therefore, I never had any interest in it and still I don't have any interest. The PRSP should be owned by our political parties. If we are to own this PRSP, then we will discuss it. We also need to under-

stand what is the status of the PRSP guide that is being prepared. The West is spending billions of dollars to get out of the financial mess they are in and we are preparing PRSP. The idea that PRSP will reduce our poverty is a fallacy.

As Ayesha Khanam mentioned regarding social management and crisis in capitalism, let us go back to the past and see if this issue is relevant to the present situation.

On the issue of political empowerment of women, the question of treating women as only voters is wrong. An issue that is frequently asked is: What is the percentage of women voters? I would like to add that women do not vote because they are women, but they vote for local politics. Here women should not be viewed as women only, but as a part of society in their own right. It is unfortunate that our Constitution did not mature as a legal entity. So we see that the question of political empowerment is being discussed frequently. It is not prevalent in our country alone, it is also being questioned in India and they are struggling with this issue as well.

However, there has been some progress in this area. The Election Commission in our country has ensured 33 percent women's participation in the political process. It is true that we are trying to insure women's participation and I believe this is indeed an important issue. In this regard we can look at the recent parliamentary elections in Nepal. There we see that women have advanced a lot through their participation. They also participated actively during the communist movement at the grassroots level. In Bangladesh, we also had this type of women participation in the past.

I have a point to make here. In Bangladesh, women's progress has been reversed. This reverse journey of the women is due to the political influence where the women have created an exclusion zone for themselves, or they are forced to, or are under social pressure. The issue of wearing of hijab by women in our country is going towards an alarming level, yet the politicians or the women activists do not discuss it. Therefore, what Begum Rokeya did for women 100 years back is on a reverse course.

Selina Hosssain

Eminent Writer and Activist

Politics and politicians both are important. Despite whatever was discussed at this Round Table, only politicians can make change happen. If they decide that they will educate or empower the people they can make it happen. I have a question and a request to the politicians: will they add any new point to their election manifestoes? Whoever they select to represent in their constituency, will they select on the basis of the opinion of both males and females? Or will they select candidates on the basis of money? I would request the politicians to think about it.

For example, I would like to ask if a political party would select a woman candidate for their constituency on the basis of her acceptability than the other candidates, even if she doesn't have the financial ability. I guess this won't happen! Secondly, would they hold accountability of the promises they make to the constituency? This should be clearly mentioned in their manifesto. If any repression or abuse happens against any women in their constituency, would they take any legal measures? And if that elected member fails to take any initiative against that crime, what action would that political party take against that elected member? If any woman is raped, would they take any open action against it? Only then it is possible to have a qualitative change. If the political parties want to ensure people's participation in the democratic process, then they have to think seriously about it and these have to be reflected in the manifesto.

The Parliament members should always be in the Parliament; be they in power, or in opposition. If any lawmaker is absent from Parliament, there should be a referendum in the constituency. We are looking for these sorts of changes at the national level. The political parties should decide how many committed such candidates they would like to nominate.

In the issue of the distribution of khas lands, we should have a discussion on it.

Meher Afroz Chumky

Former MP
Bangladesh Awami League

I am really grateful to PRIP Trust, Oxfam and the Daily Star for inviting me to this seminar and special thanks to Dr. Kaniz Siddiqui for her keynote paper.

I think PRSP will have specific goals but I do not know what kind of monitoring system is there to follow up on its advancement. If we could get the clear picture of its outcomes, we could easily design our next planning to get more positives outcomes.

Now I would like to briefly discuss women's condition not only in Bangladesh but also in South Asia. I suppose that the conditions of women can be seen on three platforms. The three are

1. Less status
2. Less pay
3. Less skill

My point is participation ratio of women as voters. Surprisingly women voters are more than men voters but women are not conscious about their democratic rights and they are not aware how to select the nominated candidate and who is the proper person for election. Most of the time women are influenced by their husbands, fathers, brothers and other male members of the family. In spite of these obstacles women and their contributions are key in electing a people's representative and forming a democratic government. I would like to mention here that when Bangladesh Awami League was elected and formed the government, it took an initiative to increase women's participation at the local government level, which can contribute largely to raise women's voice in politics.

Mujahidul Islam Selim

General Secretary, Bangladesh
Communist Party

At first I thank the organizers. I agree with Ayesha Khanum on those issues focused here. We are talking with these for many years. The issues which Tania Amir has discussed are focused here. In her speech there is a clear hint of complaint against political parties. In Bangladesh only leftist groups can demand the credit for introducing the movement for woman's rights, and they did not yet leave off after introducing it, but to advance it till today. Unfortunately, in recent years leftist parties, those that are marginalized, have taken a grand project that, here we shall bring these parties to the front.

I want to add a little more. It is said that political parties are not doing anything, NGO and civil society are doing everything. When this type of comment arises is made, that not only hurts me, but also gives me a clear impression about many issues. In maximum cases, none of us will agree practically with this, but these may be said about some political parties. But in our society where there are good, bad and different things, similarly there are two kinds of political parties. The second point is that I am agree with Rashed Khan Menon on PRSP. Has the entire plan come from PRSP? We never evaluate this positively. After liberation, we moved forward on the basis of the main principles of the state. We were moving forward after preparing five year plans. We were diverged from the planned economy to so called open market economy, and placed a theory of trickle down economy, which makes the rich richer. We are told that one day all the sorrows of the poor people will be reduced by the trickle down process, and it is advised that in the interregnum there may be disturbances.

From this point of view we will see women's empowerment. At present where does the subject of poverty alleviation stand? According to CPD report during the last two years poverty decreased by almost 8 per cent. So we are not even able to gain success in poverty alleviation. So, I agree with the advice or recommendations that are placed here. But the problem is with the roots. Without analyzing the root cause, we will not be able to move forward. The paper which has been placed by Dr. Kaniz Siddiqui, there are accusation against society. Why is society unconcerned? Why are the political parties not concerned with women's issues? But if you observe properly, you will see that society is not indifferent. The truth is that women are not empowered. An exploitative group has seized power. Ordinary people are deprived of power.

Hasanul Haque Inu

President
Jatio Samajtantrik Dal

I would like to concentrate on today's roundtable issue where poverty is the main concern. If we define the exact definition of poverty then we will be able to formulate policy, planning, program and activities. Poverty has a multidimensional perspective. The challenge remains to include the marginalized people in mainstream economic policy, planning and program implementation. The point on women issue, which Kaniz Siddiqui has already mentioned, that 'women are poorest of poor and they are more vulnerable and marginalized.' I agree with this point and also mention here that discrimination, injustice, deprivation and devaluation against women are in existing society.

So in principle PRSP is not a proper tool for women's development. Actions to reduce poverty in Bangladesh are scattered and dispersed very much. For example, age allowance, poverty allowance, mother allowance, and food for work, etc., programs are scattered steps to reduce poverty. Practically these steps cannot reduce any poverty. Moreover, the discriminations of taxation of budget and development sector are being hidden. So economic development is impossible if we are unable to remove the discriminations among development sectors. Again, the strategy paper says, private sector is the principal driver of development and corporate and FDI can play a key role in poverty alleviation. But the paper has not revealed the investment in informal sector, SME and agriculture. So, our people have no participation and ownership of the strategy paper that has been formulated in the name of poverty alleviation where. So it never carries any fruitful result to our people.

I think the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper is a huge industry of poverty reproduction. The strategy paper cannot do anything for reducing poverty, because this paper itself reproduces problems and poverty daily. I have taken 8 challenges from today's keynote paper in the light of PRSP.

1. 6 crore 20 lac people are poor in Bangladesh and among them 85% are women remaining under poverty such as the women working in the shrimp gher, rice mill or in agriculture. Our one of the challenges is keep them to the mainstream development.

Six crore and Twenty lakh women, 85% of the total women population of Bangladesh, are living much under the poverty line, who are consciously deprived from having control over resources and assets, which has made them further marginalized. In reality, women are made second category CITIZEN of the State, due to systematic exclusion process from the mainstream economic development, policy, planning, program and activities. Out of six crore and twenty lakh women, fifty-six lakh women, 7.7% of the total women population, have access to higher education, and are professionally placed in high ranking position, which is largely used as a symbol of "Economic Empowerment" by most of the policy makers, which is relatively a positive sign, in reality, it is a drop in the ocean. The

challenge remains, inclusion of 85% women in mainstream economic development, policy-planning and programmatic implementation, for reducing their vulnerable condition towards creating a gender-balanced and effective society.

2. Application of Fundamental and Constitutional Rights has become absolutely mandatory for minimizing discrimination in all spheres of lives of women, by recognizing the Fundamental Rights under clause, 28 (1) & (2).

3. In Bangladesh 45.6% women out of 77.7% are actively and directly involved in agricultural production with their routine household activities. In addition, women in rural Bangladesh are in general responsible, and directly engaged in most of the agricultural production in the pre and post harvest phases. Traditionally home gardening, farm activities, ranging from selection of seed to harvesting, and storing of crops are predominately managed by Women. Despite Women's important role in Agriculture, the traditional social norms and customary laws have confined women with the conventional traditional customs and patriarchal attitude, which deprived women from equitable economic opportunities, access and control of resources in agriculture. Recognition of "Women as Farmer", and their role in the sector of agriculture urgently required in the policy planning and programmatic implementation for reducing vulnerable and marginalized condition of women towards creating an equitable and a gender balanced society.

4. In the Garments sector, out of eighteen lakh, fifteen lakh and thirty thousand Women are working as major "Work Force". Unfortunately, Women are regular victims of Discriminatory Wage Rate, Unhealthy and Risky Working Environment, Job Insecurity, Sexual Harassment, and Overall Malpractices of Labor Law by most of the Garments Owners, which has made them extremely vulnerable. In order to reduce Wage discrimination, and to ensure Worker's protection and benefits, basic Labor Laws should be introduced for improving their over all status as a major "Work-Force".

5. Planned Policy and programmatic effort required for reducing, and minimizing high rate of "Feminization of Poverty".

6. For receiving justice, eliminate all types of Discriminatory Laws, against Women by enforcing Women friendly and Gender balanced Laws to ensure equity.

7. Judicial System, Law Enforcement Agencies, Bureaucracy and Administration requires to be more Gender Sensitive and Women Friendly, to protect Women and to receive justice. Social awareness at various strategic levels requires to be raised against Dowry, Rape, Acid throwing, Trafficking, Fatwa, Early marriage, Polygamy, Eve-teasing, and other types of Domestic Violence Against Women.

8. To receive political commitment of the leading Political Parties for promoting direct election in the "30 Reserve Seats" for women, in the Specific Constituencies. Incorporate women in the Food Policies for ensuring Food Security. #

Zia Uddin Ahmed Bablu

Presidium Member
Jatio Party

Women freedom, emancipation and empowerment are the focal point of today's round table discussion. But one thing is similar to all discussants' speeches and that is politics and politicians are responsible and influential characters. But if we consider properly it is true that all advancement and progress has been achieved by politicians and always they are in leadership position. I think my statement may be justified by historical evidence. I request all of you to remember our national movement during 1952 to 1971. For every historical or national movement the nation is eagerly waited for a sense of direction from the politicians. In 1971 Bangabandhu played a key role to free the nation from injustice and subservience. And at last the nation earned the glorious victory of independence under his leadership.

That is why we are discussing certain issues regarding women's empowerment in a free and independent country. With all my consideration I want to give all credit to the politicians for all glorious achievements. But unfortunately in the present context we cannot freely utter the statement. You know there is a trend that politics and politicians are the guilty.

As a politician I feel people's emotions and expectations. As people's representatives politicians are able take any decisions, policy, and planning to fulfill their expectations. But if they are not exercising their power properly they will be treated as national hypocrites.

We still live in a discriminatory and class stratified social structure. Women's sense of injustice and discrimination in economic, political, legal and other areas within this structure are common phenomena.

Education is the principal factor to reduce women's vulnerable position in society and to establish their equal rights. Many of here have criticised our government that we have done nothing positive. In spite of all criticism our government took the initiative to introduce free women's education from class I to class VIII. I think this was a milestone initiative for expanding women's education. I think now the situation is more positive to take such an initiative for expanding women's education from class I to higher education.

So necessary steps should be taken by the policy makers and politicians to establish women's economic, political and legal rights to reduce their vulnerability and marginalized position in society and to bring about positive changes in their lives.