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BANGLADESH'S NATIONAL ACTION PLAN ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

The Daily Star and Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), with the support of UN Women, jointly organised an online discussion titled "Bangladesh's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security" on March 18, 2021. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



ROKEYA KABIR,
Executive Director,
BNPS

We are celebrating the 50th year of our independence, and those who had been active at that time in the movement and war of liberation are aware of the necessity of peace, especially for women. Post-war conflicts are common. So, one of the primary concerns of the government after liberation war was to maintain peace so that we could start working towards the development of the country. In this backdrop, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had called for the surrender of arms after December 16, 1971. Freedom fighters who participated in the war surrendered their arms.

During that time, I was a student of Dhaka University along with being a member of the organisation named Student Union. We carried out our post-war efforts in an organised way to tackle violence and conflicts. This organised efforts of many sections of the society and government was what led to the maintenance of peace.



TANIA SHARMIN,
Programme Analyst,
WPS, UN Women

The Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is important for UN Women and the UN as a whole. In October 2000, the UN Security Council (UNSC) took the historic step of responding to women's demands by recognising and enshrining the essential role of women in securing and maintaining peace. The Security Council Resolution 1325 led to a shift in the architecture of peace processes and reconstruction to include women and gender analysis. Bangladesh was a pioneer in the adoption of this landmark resolution on WPS.

The WPS agenda does not merely relate to conflict or post-conflict situations. It is about ensuring secure and peaceful societies at all times. Bangladesh has demonstrated that it is committed to the WPS agenda by adopting and launching its National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS in November 2019.

Crafting the NAP WPS was a highly consultative process. UN Women provided technical support to the development process of this NAP. BNPS was a valued partner at the time, bringing the voices of women from the grassroots level all the way up to the national level.

The WPS agenda is highly important in the current context of the global COVID-19 pandemic which has affected our lives in unprecedented ways. Women have been disproportionately affected and harmed, whether as frontline workers, health workers, field workers, or at home with the increased care burdens and greater vulnerability in terms of their health, safety, and security. Online bullying, misogyny, and hate speech against women are on the rise as we continue to shift work to the online sphere. The pandemic is affecting women's ability to support and build resilient, peaceful, and inclusive societies.

Actions for peace and security must extend to many fronts. UN Women supports the Secretary General's five goals to realise inclusive and sustainable peace through the WPS agenda in the coming decade. Some vital actions include - women's full inclusion in all peace efforts; last minute, ad hoc, and merely symbolic participation of women is not acceptable. In cases of pushback to women's full participation and inclusion, it must be met with unconditional defence of women's rights. We need to launch a data revolution that fills the knowledge gap and leads to rapid action. With enough support, the WPS agenda will become one of the key issues that we work on together in Bangladesh on the path to ensuring gender equality and a peaceful, inclusive, and tolerant society.



TOUFIQ AL MANNAN,
Human Rights &
Gender Specialist

Derived from the four pillars of the WPS agenda, the NAP has been primarily divided into three main areas.

The first area is prevention. This area addresses the prevention of various forms of violence and conflict. It outlines what must be prevented and how it must be done, particularly in the case of sexual and gender-based violence. Additionally, it recommends strengthening social cohesion and religious harmony and efforts to ensure acts of violence are not normalised. Those involved in governmental

institutions should ensure that there are sensitive laws and initiatives to promote peace and harmony for all genders. A platform should be created to enable regular discussions among representatives of civil society, women leaders, and women organisations.

Participation is the second area. This area is built on playing a role in raising awareness regarding the necessity of women's participation, having laws and policies needed to increase their participation, and increasing women's capacity to participate at the community and national levels. A national awareness campaign is required to assess the obstacles to women's participation in decision-making. A large number of women work as labourers now but there is a huge lack of female supervisors. Research must be conducted to assess the reasons behind this. Informing women's committees in the parliament, especially about the WPS agenda, are important. At the regional level, arrangements should be made to make representatives of the government, NGOs, and community-based organisations (CBOs) aware of these issues.

The third area is protection, relief and recovery. It is concerned with how security and support will be provided and how women can be rehabilitated and can return to their normal lives. The objectives of this area are as follows: when a critical situation arises, whether natural or man-made, it is addressed appropriately. Secondly, it is expected that the peacekeeping missions will have increased skill and capacity, with a rise in women's participation and decision-making abilities. Additionally, first responders have a clear understanding of what needs to be done to ensure women's safety, security, and well-being.



MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA,
Executive Director,
Research Initiatives
Bangladesh (RIB)

Certain differences exist between the NAP of developed and developing countries. Some developing countries are in a post-conflict situation or are currently in conflict. Bangladesh differs in this aspect and therefore had to diverge from the NAP of both these groups of countries.

We had decided to take on prevention, participation, protection, relief and recovery as the pillars of our NAP. But post-pandemic, we need to consider if recovery should be dealt with separately.

Other issues are the humanitarian crises and climate change, areas in which we have a lot of experience considering natural disasters and the influx of refugees and displaced persons here. During recent work involving both the local and Rohingya community in Cox's Bazar, it was observed that the most prevalent form of violence was domestic violence. In local communities, there was an absence of a support base and a culture of silence regarding domestic violence against women. As for the Rohingya community, there has been an escalation of violence. The NAP and WPS agenda have a special responsibility in those regions in these times.



SHIMA MOSLEM,
Joint General
Secretary, Bangladesh
Mahila Parishad

We know that in any crisis, it is women who face all forms of torture but it is also women who simultaneously maintain and protect the household. Moreover, in our patriarchal society, women are at the centre of men's whims, whether as sources of their entertainment or as victims of their violence. As a result, with men being inside homes during the lockdown, the severity and incidence of oppression of women rose significantly. Furthermore, we have lost many of the gains we had made before the pandemic. There is currently an increase in children's dropout rates, a rise in child marriage cases, and working women have had to contribute more to household work.

The biggest problem in Bangladesh is that despite the adoption of several policies, there is a subsequent lack of implementation and an absence of sufficient monitoring systems. As a result, women are not being empowered.

The coordination group formed through our NAP should take the form of a full committee and regularly monitor the activities outlined in the action plan. In today's time, one cannot plan or implement without documents, research, and data. Therefore, research should be given particular importance.

Our increased dependence on technology owing to the pandemic will be long-lasting. However, it has led to a rise in cybercrimes. Cybercrimes have to be especially considered and dealt with in our NAP. Hence, monitoring of such online activities should be seen as a significant issue in our action plan.

Our conflicts aren't related to war, but rather

to communal tensions and climate disasters, the latter of which, as with other issues again, places an extra burden on women. In addition, it must be said that all women do not face the same kinds of conflicts and it varies across class and ethnicity. We must be cognizant of the differences in their situations and adapt the plan accordingly.



DR SAYEMA HAQUE BIDISHA,
Professor, Department
of Economics, Faculty
of Social Sciences,
University of Dhaka

The part where we keep getting impeded is implementation. What often occurs is that sufficient funding is not received. If sufficient monetary resources are allocated to the cause, it is often not used properly. At the same time, monitoring and evaluation infrastructure are lacking. Lastly, psychological and societal obstacles remain. When we think of the implementation of the action plan, we must keep all these factors in mind.

We must focus on the goals which have been stated so clearly in the NAP such as the goals tied to attaining equality, prevention of violence against women, and the establishment of peace. These goals align well with our plan of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 5 and 16. We can tag these plans together.

Oftentimes, because something was in the gender budget, we have been prone to getting sidetracked in tackling these issues. What we need instead are clear and definite plans and programmes to attain the goals we set. At the end of the year, monitoring and evaluation should reveal which plans had what outcomes, which ministries were more or less successful in achieving their goals, and based on the results we must plan and allocate funding accordingly. Therefore, since this is a long-term plan,

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Allocate an adequate budget for implementation of the NAP WPS
- Ensure meaningful inclusion of women in the peace building efforts
- Strengthen social cohesion and religious harmony
- Formulate gender sensitive policies and initiatives to promote peace and harmony for all
- Create a platform to enable regular consultation between representatives of civil society, women leaders, and the government for implementing NAP WPS
- Launch a national awareness campaign to identify the obstacles in the way of women's participation in decision-making
- Ensure proper implementation of the NAP WPS with a roadmap of proper monitoring and accountability
- Pay special attention to cybercrime and hate speech issues in the NAP WPS
- Increase availability of gender disaggregated data in gender related issues
- Make education policy gender sensitive and remove gender insensitive content from textbooks and media

monitoring and evaluation should be integrated with financing.

The importance of data on gender issues is undeniable. Alongside this, the several vulnerable communities who have suffered severe harm should be given monetary support while those who have been spared to some extent economically should be employed in meaningful jobs.



FARIDA YEASMIN,
Deputy Police
Commissioner, DMP

Our nation has made progress and we remain ahead of neighbouring countries in our achievement of various goals and agendas. Still, if we look at the different statistics in the police department, we can see that gender-related issues such as the violence experienced by women are seeing an upsurge at a concerning rate. In all the cases of violence, the truth is, we are fighting for women's existence. Are women not human beings?

The humiliation suffered by women is at the hands of men who are someone's father and brother. We have to look at it from that perspective.

Instead of the pandemic being seen as an opportunity for families to spend more time together, it has taken on a ghastly form with an increase in women's oppression. Women are left with no place to go to.

From the perspective of Bangladesh, we have seen that in natural or man-made disasters, nutrition, hygiene, reproductive health, and shelter for women are negatively affected. An unnatural amount of expectations are placed on women, and attempts to meet them have led to immense stress, anxiety, and trauma, along with the denial of their very humanity.

Of the different organisations which have collectively made the action plan based on WPS, I am from the Ministry of Home Affairs. We are engaged in various activities, of which,

"999" is a service most people in Bangladesh are aware of. Whenever a woman or a child faces a dangerous situation, we try to respond immediately to rescue them. We also have rehabilitation and support centres throughout Bangladesh. Alongside this, we have the Women, Support, and Investigation Division. Currently, we have established support systems for women, children, the elderly, and people with physical and mental challenges in over 500 police stations.



DR NAZNEEN AHMED,
Senior Research
Fellow, Bangladesh
Institute of
Development Studies
(BIDS)

We do not require a separate framework since we have limited resources, and our bureaucracy has limitations. The monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of this strategy can very well go with the M&E of our gender budget.

One challenge in meeting the goal of women's empowerment is women's financial capability. But there's a different dimension surrounding the financial capabilities of women. One issue is whether we can provide proper safety to women who are going out to work. Secondly, a new wave of violence has begun due to women, especially educated women, becoming financially independent. Working women are bombarded with accusatory questions from family members about their work, resulting in them quitting their stable jobs and opting for online businesses. Even though these situations fall under violence against women, how many women take legal action? What's stopping women from lodging complaints is, again, our society.

We need to grow a gender-sensitive mindset in people through content in textbooks. To achieve psychological change, we require

Implementation is surely an important aspect of the NAP. But, along with that, accountability is just as important. In terms of the budget, it needs to be very precise in regards to which aspect of the NAP it is contributing to. We also need specific ideas about the roles of each person involved in the implementation of the plan.

The issue of coordination should also be taken into account since so many different ministries and organisations will be involved in the NAP.

The referral mechanism needs to be strengthened. Women usually do not have a clear idea as to which organisations they should refer to for their specific issues. We also need to raise awareness about the consequences of the fear of violence imposed on women. In a lot of cases, women step back from even taking an initiative just due to fear. This fear needs to be included in our discussions as well.

We need more young women to stand as role models and promote women's leadership in the media. We need to nurture young women from an early age so that they can grow up to contribute to important decision-making roles. More attention needs to be paid to the voices of young women to ensure that their ideas and needs are not lost in the chaos. An intersectional perspective must be adopted whereby girls and young women are included.



FALGUNI TRIPURA,
Development Worker,
Kapaeeng Foundation

Even before COVID-19 struck our country, the Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT) saw a rise in the prevalence and incidence of measles. My question is, even in this age, why are the marginalised communities still deprived of basic medical facilities such as vaccination for measles? It has been reported that people living in the CHT do not want to take the vaccines due to certain superstitions. But, what initiatives has the government taken to clear these misconceptions?

A lot of ministries are going to be involved in the implementation of the NAP and I want to know how much participation indigenous women would have in the decision-making process of this action plan. Would their recommendations be taken into account with equal importance?



TASNIM ODRIKA,
Journalist, The Daily
Star

The media has an immense role in furthering the WPS agenda by ensuring that women are always portrayed in the correct manner. This will help in changing the general population's perspectives about women. Although gender-sensitive changes in the textbooks are important, the media usually has a far greater impact on children. Therefore, changes in the portrayal of women in the media will have a far more consequential impact.

ROKEYA KABIR,
Executive Director,
BNPS

We all know that for the development of a country, a peaceful environment is required. We recognise that this peaceful society is what we aspire for. We must also recognise the importance of women's role in building a peaceful society.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected women the most. It is globally recognised that despite this increased suffering, women have provided unmatched leadership in overcoming the situation by managing the household, children's education, and work all at the same time. Furthermore, nations with women as head of the state managed the COVID-19 crisis most effectively. In any natural disaster or conflict situation, women's leadership proved their capacity to manage the situation. But it is always observed that most of the time women are not included in decision making process. We also see a sharp increase of investment on war but we do not invest enough when it comes to dealing with the issues of gender inequality.

In our 50th year of independence we have made some significant achievements. Now we need to consolidate our achievements while moving forward and dismantle the disabling environment that hold us back. A citizen living with equality and dignity is a constitutional right in Bangladesh and we need to make this constitutional right a reality. This is the way we can pay our proper respects to the three million martyrs who have sacrificed their lives for our independence.



KASHFIA FERAZ,
Director, Girls'
Right Project,
Plan International
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