

Democracywatch

Report on Gender Fair: 2011

Gender equality is, first and foremost human rights. Women are entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for development and reducing poverty.

Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of the whole family and community and help build the next generation. The importance of gender equality is underscored by its inclusion as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality is acknowledged as being the key to achieving the other seven goals.

Since 1995 Democracywatch has dedicated itself to strengthening democracy, developing democratic culture, leadership qualities among youths, especially women through various courses, trainings and social activities. These have given the young women and men the skills and awareness needed for their empowerment as leaders in their respective spheres of life.

Since its inception, Democracywatch has organized festivals/fairs on democracy, youth, local government and gender to share their and other partners' achievements, knowledge and materials with the people, discussed about way forward and gave the participants the opportunity to express their opinion on human rights, good governance, gender equality and empowerment of people.

On May 9 and 10, 2011 Democracywatch arranged a two day long Gender Fair as before at Diploma Engineers Institute, Kakrail, Dhaka to share and promote woman's political and economic empowerment with the theme of 'Women as Leaders'.

In addition to Inaugural Ceremony, there were four other sessions such as two seminars; one on "Political Empowerment" and another on "Economic Empowerment", presentation and discussion on the study report on "Life and Livelihood of Women Pavement Dwellers of Dhaka City" prepared by the participants of Gender and Governance Training Program. Honoring selected Women Achievers was a unique event which highlighted this years' fair. There were other attractive events like cultural show and display of crafts and goods produced by women entrepreneurs. A display of materials on gender issues developed by various national and international organizations also been arranged. Representatives of various agencies, policy makers, civil society members, media personnel, academicians and other stakeholders took part in different events.

The Honorable Member of the Parliament and Chairperson Parliamentary Standing Committee for Women and Children Affairs, **Mrs. Meher Afroz Chumki** was present in

the Inaugural Ceremony as the chief guest. The ceremony was chaired by **Ms. Latifa Akanda**, Chairperson of Democracywatch Board of Governors.



The Inauguration Ceremony started with National anthem and presentation of a brief cultural program by 'Dibbo Dance' troops. In her welcome speech, **Ms. Taleya Rehman**, Executive Director of Democracywatch welcomed all the distinguished guests of the fair. She also mentioned the role of Democracywatch to establish good governance, human rights, women rights and developing leadership among the youth. She pointed out that mass people especially young people should be aware on gender issues. Only a gender sensitive person can help to reduce and remove gender based violence from society. This two day gender fair was also an initiative to sensitize the youth on gender related issues.

Among the speakers **Ms. Farah Kabir**, Country Director, Action Aid Bangladesh, said women's contribution is undeniable in every family. She protested against the use of the title 'Birangana' for the female freedom fighters. She mentioned that both male and female citizens have fought in the war of independence. She demanded that word *birangana* should be replaced with "Freedom fighter". Because although they did not take part in "Muktijoddho" directly but they made sacrifices for the country which should be acknowledged as freedom fighting.

In her speech, **Ms. Geetiara Safia Chowdhury** Former Adviser, Caretaker Government and Chairman and Managing Director, ADCOMM Limited, said that women have to work from their respective position for moving towards the path of leadership. It is not necessary for a woman to be urban and educated. She shared her experience that she had seen a village woman sensitizing local young men on the negative impact of sexual harassment on the society.

Ms. Rasheda K Chowdhury Former Adviser, Caretaker Government and Executive Director, CAMPE, appreciated Democracywatch's initiative in attracting policy makers on gender issues along with sensitizing people in general. She reminded the audience of the contribution of women in the economy of Bangladesh. She said that women have contributed to readymade garments sector to construction sector as workers. But we have to put more emphasis on individual leadership building. We need a women friendly environment and supportive policy so that women do not remain backward and stumble on their way to progress.

Professor **Latifa Akanda** said that we have to work from micro to macro level. It will help people to be aware on gender issues. She mentioned that development will be possible only when women and men work together.

Chief Guest, Honorable MP & Chairperson, Parliamentary Standing Committee of Women & Child Affairs, Ms. **Meher Afroze Chumki** said that large numbers of women are contributing to all spheres of life. Difference between men and women is made by the society. She put emphasis on primary education for women's empowerment. It is important to create awareness especially among the grass root women on need for education so that they can significantly contribute to the society. She said that current government is women friendly and they are working for the development of women. Women are always under scrutiny in the name of religion. We have to recognize their contribution and provide necessary support for their work inside and outside home. The Chief Guest emphasized that we all should work together for women's development.

The second session was on "**Political Empowerment of Women**". Honorable MP **Sarah begum Kabori** was the chief guest of the program. Advocate Sigma Huda moderated the program. Professor Bodiul Alam Mojumder presented the keynote paper titled "Women's representation in the parliament: Prospect in which way". Honorable MPs Tahura Ali, and Nilufar Moni, Professor Maleka Begum, women activist, Farah Kabir, country director Action Aid were present as discussants. Ms. Taleya Rehman, Executive Director, Democracywatch, chaired the session.



Professor **Bodiul Alam Mojumdar**, said that women may be represented in the parliament in three different process i.e. nomination to the reserved seats, direct election and election in the constituencies selected on rotation basis. It may be mentioned that a bill was presented in Rajyashava, India to introduce this system. Although it has not been passed yet. Quota system also can be two kinds; one is “winner- take- all” or all reserved seats will be allocated to the party which got majority vote in the election and the second quota system where women’s reserved seats are allocated to the parties in accordance to percentage of representation in the parliament. In the election based quota system women’s reserved seats will be filled by direct election. We follow this kind of system in our Union Parishad or local Government elections. In the rotation system a selected number of constituencies will be reserved for only women candidates in one election and then in the next election another group of constituencies will be earmarked for only women candidates to contest. In this system increase in the number of seats in the parliament is not necessary and also the women members will have their own constituencies. At the end Mr. Mojumder commented that among three quota systems rotation system will be the best one for the women’s political empowerment.

Professor **Maleka Begum** said that she is working for last forty years for the development of women and women’s empowerment. She expressed that in the parliament, parliamentarians always give more emphasis on the development of infrastructure in their constituencies than on the development of women.

In her speech **Farah kabir** mentioned that on the women’s issues the scenario is almost same in both developed and developing world. May be there is difference in terms of political idealism or the philosophy but when it boils down to women’s empowerment or equal representation in the parliament then there is no difference. She further said that we can propose hundred reserved seats for women in the parliament as professor **Badiul Alam Mojumdar** suggested. But without changing our political culture, positive change will not be achieved. She demanded that women should be represented from all walks of life- from sex worker to indigenous women and garments worker.

At the beginning of her speech **MP Nilufar Moni** wished all the women Happy Mothers’ Day. She said Women are still fighting for their existence in the society. Though 33% women in the reserved seats was promised. The real scenario was different. There are only two elected female Mayors of municipality. For a male candidate it is easy to participate in the election, but women candidates have to manage their family and society first and then become politicians.

MP Tohura Ali commented that at the very beginning fifteen seats were allocated for women in the parliament. Now it has been increased to thirty. She believed that women should contest in direct election and not be limited to reserved seats only.

We should work together for the women's development and there should be coordination between all the elected members to take actions in the women related issues as mentioned by the Chief Guest Honorable MP **Sarah begum Kabori**. It is important to implement National Women Policy for the women empowerment. All the Political parties should take necessary steps for the women's political empowerment. Women are capable of taking more responsibility in the political field.

The session was followed by the open discussion. It was recommended from the floor that women should have access to the property and all spheres of life to be able to participate in elections.

The session on “**Economic Empowerment**” was held in the afternoon. **Rokeya Afzal Rahman**, President, Bangladesh Federation of Women Entrepreneur and Former advisor of Bangladesh Caretaker Government, graced the session as the Chief Guest and Dvelopment and Management consultant **Mirza Nazmul Huda** moderated the session. **Syed Rezwanul Kabir**, Managing Director, SME Foundation, **Kaniz Almas Khan** CEO Persona Beauty Care, **Gulshan Nasrin Chowdhury**, Chairperson Radiant Institute of Design and Professor **Latifa Akanda** was present in the program as discussants. The session started with case studies presented by selected entrepreneurs themselves.



Hasina Mukta, a woman entrepreneur said that she received training in skills but she does not have other related skills such as how to manage business, costing and pricing of the products, source of fund etc. She realized that to establish her business it is important to learn all aspects of business. Hasina stated that she needed training on various issues like nother female entrepreneur **Shahida Begum** expressed that female entrepreneurs need more fund to expand their business but due to complicated lending procedureds they do not have easy access to Bank loans. **Mahfuza Begum** told that she wants to export her product outside the country but she does not know how to open a

LC or where she should go for necessary information. They also told that fluctuation in price of raw material is a major problem for marketing their products.

Gulshan Nasrin chowdhury commented that women have to be confident enough of their own capability to achieve success which will help them to earn recognition in the society. At the same time she mentioned that women must have adequate training and knowledge to initiate new plan and program.

Kaniz Almas Khan said that family support is an essential component for women to become successful entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs need family support more than financial support. She also mentioned that it will facilitate the women entrepreneur if government makes policies for easy access to bank loan with reduced interest rate and taxes for women.

Syed Rzwanul Kabir director of **SME foundation** said that in order to facilitate SME the Foundation is issuing ID card for the small entrepreneurs so that they are not being harassed by the tax people. They have also made arrangement with the Mutual Trust Bank to provide loan without collaterals and at 9% interest to small entrepreneurs. The Foundation is also working with the bank to introduce six month or one year grace period for loan repayment. To facilitate home based marketing on every three months SME organizes training in computer for 25 participants and assists in development of product catalogues which are accessible worldwide. SME also sends selected women entrepreneurs to international fairs. He invited the entrepreneurs present at the session to contact him whenever they needed any help.

The Chief Guest Ms. **Rokeya Afzal Rahman** in her speech said that women entrepreneurs are more regular than men in repayment of loan. Bangladesh Bank is pressurizing the commercial banks to issue loan to women entrepreneurs. Although there are risk factors, more women should come forward as large entrepreneurs. Women should concentrate on improved design for better market of their products. Women should also learn computer for expanding their business. She invited the women entrepreneurs to participate and share their problems in the meetings held every Thursday at MIDAS.



On the second day of the fair the participants of Gender and Governance Training Program (GGTP) presented a study report on “Life and Livelihood of the Pavement Dwellers”. **Mr. Enamul Haque Mostofa Shahid, MP**, Honourable Minister, Ministry of Social Welfare, Government of The People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the session as the Chief Guest and Mr. Ranjit Kumar Bishwas, Secretary, Ministry of Social Welfare, Government of The people’s Republic of Bangladesh was present as special guest. Professor A.S.M. Atiqur Rahman, Institute of Social Welfare & Research, University of Dhaka moderated the program. Ms. Maheen Sultan, Coordinator, Pathway of Women Empowerment Research Program, BRAC and Professor Ishrat Shamim, President, CWCS were present as discussants. The session was chaired by Professor Latifa Akand.

The participants gave a power point presentation of the study report which also covered photographs on living condition of the pavement dwellers. This was followed by narration by a pavement dweller on the deplorable condition in which she lives.

Ms. Maheen Sultan congratulated Democracywatch for undertaking a study on such an important subject. She commented that instead of incorporating too many issues in the study, the study could have concentrated more intensively on a few selected issues. More information required on security and privacy. Relevant authority should be informed about police harassments.

Professor Ishrat Shamim also appreciated the study report. She said that an addition of a few case studies would have enriched the study report.

The Chief Guest in his speech said the state is responsible to meet the basic needs of the people. With increase in population of Dhaka city, number of floating population is also increasing. It is time to think about the problems of these destitute city people and how to solve the problem. He requested Democracywatch to send the study report to the Ministry of Social Welfare for necessary action. Similarly, the special guest also assured that he will also raise the issue of pavement dwellers with his officers in the Ministry. The Chairperson in appreciation of the study report said that the report should have been in Bangla to cater the need of more reader.

As mentioned earlier, honoring selected Women Achievers was a unique event which highlighted this years’ fair. The session started with a cultural show. A total of eight eminent women were awarded for their contribution in various development fields. Award was given to following distinguished persons:

1. **Ms. Jesmin Tuli** in recognition of her firm and efficient performance as the first women returning officer in Chittagong City Corporation election will be an example for the future generations.
2. **Professor Protiva Mutsundi** for her lifetime contribution towards women’s education and social service which will inspire the future generation in serving humanity.

3. **Monira Rahman** in acknowledgment for social service to the neglected women acid victims abandoned by the family and society
4. **Aysha Nizamuddin** for her relentless effort to establish herself as a successful business woman.
5. First Women National Professor **Sufia Ahmed** in appreciation for her lifetime contribution in encouraging young boys and girls to gain knowledge.
6. **Sabina Hussain** in acknowledgement for her incessant service for countless neglected autistic children through education to unfold their potent intellect.
7. Professor **Latifa Akand** for her lifetime contribution in women's development and to serve the abandoned children in establishing their right to live.
8. **Tahrunnesa Abdullah** for her service in education and poverty alleviation of rural women in Bangladesh.



The Chief Guest of the session **Mr. Mahbul Alam**, Editor, Daily Independent & Advisor of Former Caretaker Government, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh presented the crests to the distinguished awardees.

A total of 26 stalls were arranged in the fair. Twelve of them displayed materials on various development issues produced by organizations such as IOM, RMMRU, TIB, ICDDR, ASK, Nari Moitree, Steps Towards Development, WARBE Development Foundation, Sajida Foundation, UDDIPAN and Democracywatch. The rest were by the women entrepreneurs displaying their hand made goods among them were Sat Rong boutique, Natunatta Boutique & Handi Craft, OTOSHEE, Asma Handicraft & Jute Products, Matuail Jamdani House, Taslima Pearl House, Jesmin Boutique, Bash, Bet O Pati Shilpa, Willis Collection & Nishorgi, Nasima's Creations and Rokeya Productions.

The Honorable MPs distinguished guests and many other people appreciated the products. The stall owners were happy to take part in the fair which gave them opportunity to sell their products and also share their experience with others.

Altogether everyone agreed that it was a successful, informative and enjoyable event which should be arranged regularly.