



A joint statement by AFAD and Odhikar on the occasion of International Women's Day 2021

BANGLADESH: Ensure Women's Empowerment by Achieving Gender Equality

Dhaka/Manila, 8 March 2021: Violence and discrimination against women are widespread in Bangladesh. Moreover, due to rampant human rights violations such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, deaths in custody due to torture, majority of women from victim families face trauma, insecurity and financial difficulties. In Bangladesh, along with the repression by the authoritarian regime, women face a deep-rooted patriarchal power system. The victims of enforced disappearance or extrajudicial killing are mainly male who in most cases are breadwinners. Therefore, their disappearance or extrajudicial killing not only creates severe trauma in the families but also imposes extreme financial burden on them. Women, especially wives of victims, suddenly find themselves heading the household even as they struggle to cope with the trauma.

March 8, 2021 is the International Women's Day. This year's theme is: "Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world."

The Covid-19 world is a completely new reality. Due to Covid-related "general holiday"¹ in Bangladesh, many women have become victims of domestic violence. Between April and September 2020, 40,000 women were victims of domestic violence, of which 40% or 16,000 women became victims of domestic violence for the first time. Domestic violence increased by 31% in May compared to the first two months of the "general holiday" between March and April 2020.² The number of child marriages has increased in Bangladesh during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In many cases, the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, the closure of educational institutions for a long time and the possibility of sexual harassment, have induced child marriages. Child marriages have increased by 13% in the country during the Coronavirus outbreak. This is the highest rate in the last 25 years. According to various non-governmental organisations, child marriages increased at an alarming rate from May to September 2020.³

¹ Lockdown

² Annual Human Rights Report 2020, Bangladesh, Odhikar; http://www.odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Annual-HR-Report-2020_Eng.pdf

³ Annual Human Rights Report 2020, Bangladesh, Odhikar; http://www.odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Annual-HR-Report-2020_Eng.pdf

Rape has been rampant in Bangladesh and rape of girls was almost double that of women in 2020. There are allegations that the police were involved in many of these incidents or were aware of what had happened. Many rape victims and their families hide the incidence of rape due to persistent impunity and social stigma. Even if they disclose their victimization, it is far-fetched that they will get justice. Aside from rape, dowry and related violence, acid assault and sexual harassment, and stalking are massively committed with impunity against women and girls.

Amid the Covid-19 difficulties, many women workers in the ready-made garment factories have lost their jobs and have been deprived of maternity benefits. Factory authorities even terminate pregnant women workers.

Moreover, female participation in politics in Bangladesh is hindered by reprisals, persecution, insecurity and by the violation of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association and of expression and opinion. The draconian Digital Security Act, 2018 and other repressive laws gag voices of dissent.

AFAD and Odhikar believe that without upholding human rights and ensuring participative democracy and basic freedoms, and the scrapping of repressive laws, women's empowerment and gender equality in Bangladesh will remain elusive.

The Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) is a federation of human rights organisations working directly on the issue of involuntary disappearances in Asia. Envisioning a world without desaparecidos, AFAD was founded on June 4, 1998 in Manila, Philippines. AFAD was the recipient of the 2016 Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award conferred by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. www.afad-online.org

Odhikar is a registered human rights organisation based in Dhaka, Bangladesh established on October 10, 1994 by a group of human rights defenders, to monitor human rights violations and create wider awareness. It holds special consultative status with the ECOSOC of the United Nations. www.odhikar.org