A Joint Statement by the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances, Asian Human Rights Commission, International Federation for Human Rights and Odhikar on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women 2020

BANGLADESH: Violence against women on the rise amid COVID-19 and rampant impunity

Dhaka/Manila/Hong Kong/Paris, 24 November 2020: November 25 marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, numerous reports have emerged that all types of violence against women (VAW), especially domestic violence, have intensified worldwide.[1] UN termed the upsurge in VAW the "shadow pandemic "and emphasized the need for a global collective effort to stop it.

In Bangladesh, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, along with domestic violence (dowry is one of the major causes of domestic violence), rape against women and children (i.e. girls below the age of 18), has increased. According to information gathered by Odhikar, between January and September 2020, a total of 919 women and children were victims of rape. Among the victims, 325 were women and 569 were children. The rape of children is nearly two times higher than that of adult women – a worrying matter. Among those 919 women and children, 21 women and 18 children were killed after being raped. During the same period in 2019, a total of 834 women and children were raped, according to Odhikar documentation.

Rule of law and human rights are being grossly violated in Bangladesh. The restrictions and measures put in place by the authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened the overall human rights situation. When the government announced a "general holiday" (its term for lockdown), many workers lost their jobs, and, as a result of such protracted lockdowns, the number of people staying at home has increased.[2] Financial loss and close quarters have increased frustrations and tempers. The patriarchal mindset of society has created more pressure on women. In many households, women are being pressured to do the majority or all domestic work – including the extra work resulting from demands by husbands and children staying at home. In addition, frequent conflicts and violence in relation to dowry demands due to various reasons, including loss of income, have been reported.

Regardless of the pandemic, perpetrators of acts of VAW frequently enjoy rampant impunity, due to the lack of implementation of relevant laws, an ineffective criminal justice system, corruption in the law enforcement and administration sectors, and political protections for perpetrators. On 12 October 2020, the Cabinet approved an amendment to the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act to introduce the death penalty for individuals found guilty

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[1] https://www.un.org/en/observances/ending-violence-against-women-day
https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25749;
https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/193/96/PDF/N2019396.pdf?OpenElement;
https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406
[2] According to a survey of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) about 13 percent people have become unemployed in the country due to Covid-19 pandemic. https://www.thedailystar.net/business/13pc-people-lost-jobs-in-bangladesh-due-covid-19-pandemic-1920309

of rape[3], which Parliament eventually passed on 17 November 2020 ensuring death penalty as the highest punishment for rape.[4] This came after a series of nationwide large street protests in response to an increase in cases of rape and lack of justice for the victims. However, we believe that the death penalty will not stop VAW as long as the ineffective, highly politicized, and corruption-prone criminal justice system is not reformed. Furthermore, we are concerned over the risk that this new legal provision may be used to take action against innocent people, with irreversible and fatal consequences. What is urgently needed is a reformed, effective, independent criminal justice system to combat the increasing rates of VAW and the impunity for the perpetrators. Ultimately, without a democratic people's government, women's rights and all other human rights cannot be enjoyed in Bangladesh.

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

*The **Asian Human Rights Commission** (AHRC) works towards the radical rethinking and fundamental redesigning of justice institutions in order to protect and promote human rights in Asia. Established in 1984, the Hong Kong based organization is a Laureate of the Right Livelihood Award, 2014.*

*The **International Federation for Human Rights** (FIDH) is the world's oldest non-governmental human rights organization. Founded in 1922, FIDH federates 192 member organizations from 117 countries. Its core mandate is to promote respect for all the rights set out in the UDHR.*

***Odhikar**, meaning 'rights' in Bangla, is a registered human rights organization 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.*

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[3]https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/2020/10/12/cabinet-approves-inclusion-of-death-penalty-in-rape-lawPrevention of Women and Children Repression (Amendment) Bill, 2020;
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/12/bangladesh-approves-death-penalty-for-rape-cases
[4]https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/death-penalty-rape-amended-women-and-children-repression-prevention-bill-passed-1996573