



# Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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## Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Sixty-fifth session

### Summary record of the 1453rd meeting\*

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Tuesday, 8 November 2016, at 10 a.m.

*Chair:* Ms. Hayashi

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(*continued*)

*Eighth periodic report of Bangladesh*

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\* No summary records were issued for the 1451st and 1452nd meetings.

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*The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.*

**Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention**

*Eighth periodic report of Bangladesh (CEDAW/C/BGD/8; CEDAW/C/BGD/Q/8 and Add.1)*

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Bangladesh took places at the Committee table.*
2. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh), introducing the State party's eighth periodic report (CEDAW/C/BGD/8), said that the Government was aiming to transform Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2021 and into a developed economy by 2041, and that it could not achieve those goals without the contributions of women, who constituted half the population. Great strides had been made in developing women's socioeconomic status, improving their education, fostering female leadership and reducing poverty, and gender-sensitive budgets had been allocated to 40 government ministries, which were thus now required to demonstrate how their spending contributed to women's advancement. Moreover, under the country's seventh five-year plan, priority had been placed on creating a gender-equal society and mainstreaming women's development. The National Women's Development Policy had been updated in 2011 and responsibility for setting the objectives and implementing the actions envisaged thereunder lay with the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs. Significant progress had also been made towards achieving a number of Millennium Development Goal targets, and an action plan for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals was being formulated.
3. Women's engagement was evident everywhere, including at the highest levels: increasing numbers of women occupied high-ranking positions in the Government — including as Prime Minister and leader of the opposition — and also in the judiciary, the diplomatic service and academia. Women were also present in the military and in peacekeeping missions. To further promote women's leadership, the Government had set recruitment quotas for women of 10 per cent for gazetted, or managerial, posts in the civil service and 15 per cent for non-gazetted positions; a third of the seats in local government bodies and 50 out of 350 parliamentary seats were reserved for women; and provision had been made to ensure that, by 2020, women occupied a third of all posts in political parties.
4. Women's participation in the labour market and their contribution to the Bangladesh economy were also on an upward trajectory. Around 4 million women were involved in the ready-made garments industry, but women were also working in agriculture, industry and the service sector. Women's economic empowerment had also gained momentum. Bangladesh Bank, the central bank of Bangladesh, made collateral-free loans available to women entrepreneurs, while the Small and Medium Enterprises Foundation also provided some funding.
5. The Government had taken concrete action to reduce poverty. By way of example, a targeted social assistance programme to improve the nutritional status of malnourished women and children had benefited more than a million rural women. A range of social benefits, including maternity and breastfeeding allowances and special welfare payments for Dalit women and transgender persons, were also available. In total, up to US\$ 4 billion was allocated to the country's social welfare system each year. Day-care centres had been set up for the children of low- and middle-income working mothers, and youth clubs had been established as part of a programme to empower girls and boys and foster the construction of a society built on non-discrimination.
6. In the area of health, a number of measures had been adopted to ensure women's access to specialized medical care, including the establishment of women-friendly hospitals,

a maternal health voucher scheme, community-based nutrition programmes and emergency antenatal care. Information was disseminated via radio and television in order to combat biased cultural attitudes and raise awareness of reproductive health, family planning and HIV/AIDS. In education, nearly 2 million girls had benefited from stipends, and various measures had been introduced to reduce the dropout rate among girls, such as the provision of school meals in poverty-stricken areas and separate girls' toilets in every school.

7. Like other countries, Bangladesh was facing an influx of undocumented persons who were fleeing conflicts in their own countries. The Government had conducted a survey to gain a better idea of the number and location of Rohingya people from Myanmar who were living in Bangladesh with a view to providing more targeted and streamlined humanitarian aid, including support and security for the Rohingya refugees living in the Cox's Bazar area, and guaranteeing access to health care and family planning.

8. Despite the noteworthy achievements made in Bangladesh, some challenges remained to be addressed — specifically, the prevalence of violence against women, trafficking of women and child marriage — and equal pay for equal work and women's equal property rights had still to be established as legislative principles. A number of measures had, however, been taken to combat violence against women. The amended 2013 Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act had been enacted and some cases involving violence against women were now held in special tribunals. One-stop crisis centres were in place to provide victims with medical and psychological care, legal assistance and six months' subsistence, while a 24-hour toll-free telephone hotline had been set up to enable victims to report incidents. In addition, the Department of Women's Affairs ran sensitization programmes to increase women's awareness of issues such as human trafficking, early child marriage, domestic violence and sexual harassment.

9. Various pieces of legislation were in place to prevent sexual harassment and sexual violence against women and girls, and the High Court of Bangladesh had issued guidelines for preventing sexual harassment in the workplace and in educational establishments. Sensitization programmes were being implemented in schools, and efforts were being made to strengthen enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Dowry Prohibition Act. A new law to prevent child marriage was awaiting the approval of the Cabinet of Ministers, and the Prime Minister had pledged to put an end to marriages involving children under 15 years old by 2021. A number of measures had also been taken with a view to preventing trafficking, including the establishment of a bilateral mechanism for cooperation between the Governments of Bangladesh and India. Protection and rehabilitation services for trafficking victims were provided in cooperation with NGOs, and a shelter was also available.

10. While women could exercise their right to divorce without hindrance, an in-depth examination of the issues surrounding the country's reservations to articles 2 and 16 (1) (c) of the Convention was still required. The long-standing social values, customs and cultures in place in Bangladesh had to be respected. Avenues for building consensus among the general public were being explored, and efforts were being made to study the experiences of Muslim countries that had already withdrawn those reservations.

#### *Articles 1 to 6*

11. **Ms. Patten** said she was concerned that, despite the Committee's recommendation that the State party should expedite the withdrawal of its reservations to the Convention, and the fact that the reservation to article 2 was in direct contradiction with the Constitution of Bangladesh, no concrete action appeared to have been taken. She wished to know what consideration was being given to the matter; whether a specific time frame had been set for the reservations to be withdrawn; and whether the Government had taken steps to engage with religious scholars from countries with similar sociocultural, religious and legal

systems that had succeeded in withdrawing their reservations. She would also like to know whether there were any plans to repeal the many laws and provisions that were discriminatory to women and girls; and, if so, when those plans would be actioned. In that connection, she would be interested to know the status of the anti-discrimination bill, the time line envisaged for its adoption, and whether the bill covered discrimination in both the public and private spheres and discrimination against vulnerable groups of women.

12. She asked what measures had been taken to enact and implement legislation to prevent sexual harassment in all walks of life, in line with the 2010 directive from the High Court, and whether the Act on the Suppression of Violence against Women and Children would also be amended. She wondered what steps had been taken to tackle the patriarchal attitudes that persisted within the judiciary and law enforcement agencies; to address the judicial system's lack of resources and poor infrastructure, which negatively affected women's access to justice; and to prevent the stigmatization of women who sought justice.

13. Regarding the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who were victims of multiple forms of discrimination, violence, human rights violations and loss of their ancestral lands, she asked whether there were any plans for indigenous peoples to be recognized under the Constitution; whether the Government intended to establish an independent land commission for indigenous peoples to facilitate the resolution of land disputes; what steps were being taken to address the widespread violence and sexual harassment that were used as tactics to deprive indigenous women of their lands; and to what extent the Government was promoting the inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups of women in decision-making processes affecting them. As to the Rohingya peoples, who had no legal status in Bangladesh, she wished to draw the delegation's attention to the Committee's general recommendation No. 28 on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 of the Convention, which stated that protection under the Convention was applicable to both citizens and non-citizens. What measures were being taken to ensure that essential services and legal protection were provided to Myanmar nationals?

14. Lastly, she would be interested to know whether there were any plans to adopt a national plan of action to implement the concluding observations of the Committee. That approach had been used by other States parties to good effect.

15. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that efforts were being made to prepare the public for withdrawal of the State party's reservations to the Convention. The process would not be concluded until a strong foundation for withdrawal had been laid, as the reservations had been entered so as to respect the beliefs of the country's various religious groups. Sexual harassment was being tackled through various initiatives, and preventive and punitive legislation was being considered.

16. **Mr. Abul Hossain** (Bangladesh) said that equal opportunities for men and women were provided for under the Constitution and promoted through the policies and action plans being developed by various ministries. Women also benefited from legal provisions that promoted opportunities for deprived sectors of society. The country's many madrasas were the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, which engaged directly with the community, while the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs worked in close cooperation with imams and other religious leaders.

17. The public had been made aware of the High Court directive on sexual harassment. The Ministry of Education had issued corresponding instructions to all educational institutions, which were now required to have complaints boxes available, while the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office had issued guidelines to local authorities. There had been significant changes on the ground as a result.

18. Women's access to justice had been improved through the provision of legal aid and the establishment of local committees that facilitated dialogue between judges and lawyers.

Poor women received regular support from the Government. A friendly environment had been created in courts and more than 1,000 judges had been sent for training in Australia. The higher courts provided online services, and the lower courts would follow suit in the future. School textbooks had been amended to educate young people, their families and teachers on access to justice.

19. **Mr. Das** (Bangladesh) said that legal aid officers had the authority to establish local-level mechanisms to ensure that cases could be concluded more swiftly, and sexual harassment cases could be heard by magistrates sitting in mobile courts. There were no legal obstacles preventing women from going to court, but there were economic, social and geographical barriers. Judges, of whom more than 15 per cent were women, were committed to women's rights and received training on legislation related to those rights, including the Convention.

20. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that all ethnic minorities, including those resident in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, were recognized and guaranteed equality before the law under the Constitution. Having suffered discrimination in the past, persons from the Dalit community were now granted special allowances and benefited from job quotas in certain areas of activity.

21. **Ms. Halperin-Kaddari** asked which groups "the public" comprised and who would decide when "the public" was ready for the withdrawal of the State party's reservations to the Convention. She wished to know whether the Government had considered involving women, including female religious leaders, in examining the possibilities for change. Expressing concern about the recent adoption of legislation that would tighten control over NGOs and restrict their freedom of expression, she asked whether the Government envisaged undertaking a study into the possible negative effects of that legislation on women's NGOs and taking measures to prevent adverse consequences.

22. **Ms. Patten** said that she would welcome the delegation's comments on the lack of consistency between the State party's reservation to article 2 of the Convention and its Constitution. She urged it to provide a time frame for the withdrawal of the reservations, and also for the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation. The delegation's claims that there were no obstacles to women's access to justice were contradicted by the State party's own report, in which reference was made to the judiciary's patriarchal attitudes and lack of commitment to women's rights, and by the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on her visit to Bangladesh (A/HRC/26/38/Add.2). She wished to know what measures had been adopted to assist vulnerable groups in addition to Dalit women, such as older women and women with disabilities, and asked whether the Government would consider drawing up an action plan for the implementation of the Committee's concluding observations.

23. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that the Government adopted measures when it felt that the public, by which it meant all citizens throughout the country, was ready. The new legislation on NGOs had been introduced to ensure that they could be held accountable and also as a means to tackle terrorism. However, the Government appreciated the work of the increasing numbers of NGOs active in the country.

24. **Mr. Mohammed Shafiqur Rahman** (Bangladesh) said that the Government did not restrict the work of NGOs that complied with the law.

25. **Mr. Abul Hossain** (Bangladesh) said that, as an action plan for implementation of the National Women's Development Policy — the provisions of which were in line with those of the Convention — already existed, an additional plan to implement the Convention was unnecessary. The Government would decide on whether a discrete anti-discrimination law was needed once the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs had concluded the legislative review it was currently undertaking with support from the United Nations

Development Programme. The number of female judges in the lower courts was increasing gradually, along with the number of female police officers.

26. **Mr. Das** (Bangladesh) said that the anti-discrimination legislation proposed by the Law Commission and the National Human Rights Commission was being studied and had already been the subject of a workshop for civil society. Further consultations were planned.

27. **Ms. Nwankwo** said there had been reports that, despite its broad mandate, the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs suffered from structural weaknesses, insufficient technical capacity and resources, and inadequate staffing levels in its Policy, Leadership and Advocacy Unit. She asked why the Minister responsible for women and children affairs was not a member of the Cabinet; whether the Ministry's budget was due to be increased; whether the Ministry would be given greater authority to oversee gender mainstreaming in other ministries and, if so, how; and what specific support the Ministry would receive to implement the National Women's Development Policy and fulfil the Government's other gender equality commitments. Since the work of the field offices of the Department of Women's Affairs was reportedly hindered by their lowly status, logistical obstacles and capacity constraints, she asked what might be done to enhance their capacity; and what strategies were being used to facilitate the recruitment of adequately skilled employees in general.

28. While the high-level composition of the National Council for Women's and Children's Development was commendable, there were reports that the Council was ineffective because it failed to meet regularly and its agenda and conclusions were not made public. She would like to know what the Council's functions and mandate were; what relationship it enjoyed with the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs; and how its efficacy and transparency were guaranteed.

29. As funds to address the structural causes of inequality and injustice and to promote gender equality were reportedly in short supply, she wondered whether a mechanism might be established that would make it possible to track aid flows from a gender equality perspective. Such a system would make development partners and donors more accountable and ensure that their contributions were used to address persistent inequalities.

30. **Ms. Gabr** said that the State party's progress in the use of temporary special measures was good, but still insufficient. For example, women did not yet occupy all of the 50 seats in Parliament that had been reserved for them and the women appointed by political parties had not always been of the expected calibre — a situation that harmed women's credibility in Parliament. She asked how that problem would be addressed; and how temporary special measures might be used to strengthen women's rights in areas where they required support, which included, for example, access to credit and access to basic social services. She suggested that the Government might also consider using temporary special measures as a means to combat the feminization of poverty, and using civil society as a conduit for raising awareness of temporary special measures and their benefits in general.

31. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs was accorded special importance by the Prime Minister. Ministers of state enjoyed full authority over the affairs of their ministries and, under the Constitution, could be designated as members of the Cabinet. Women could be directly elected to Parliament by its members, with the vote weighted according to each political party's representation in Parliament. Their political empowerment would increase progressively as it was prioritized at all levels, and the Government aimed to ensure that at least one third of all political party representatives were women by 2021.

32. **Mr. Abul Hossain** (Bangladesh) said that the Government was making significant efforts to prevent child marriage, including by delivering training for marriage registrars

and ensuring registration of all births and deaths. School textbooks had been revised to include a section on the appropriate minimum age for marriage and the problems that could be caused by child marriage. There were gender mainstreaming focal points in all ministries. Given that girls were currently outperforming boys at school, female school leavers had better employment opportunities than their male counterparts. In that context, the 10 and 15 per cent quotas for women's representation in civil service posts were reasonable. Public opinion about women's role in local government was changing, and society was starting to embrace the notion of female local representatives. In time, that would be reflected at the national level.

33. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that special benefits were available for widows and persons with disabilities. The Prime Minister's daughter had launched an initiative to tackle discrimination against persons with disabilities.

34. **Mr. Alam** (Bangladesh) said that the 33 per cent quota for women was currently applied in all local government institutions. The 70 seats in Parliament currently occupied by women equated to 20 per cent of the total and included the 50 seats reserved for women plus 20 seats to which women had been directly elected. Expenditure on women's empowerment had increased from 3.95 per cent of gross domestic product in 2009/2010 to 4.61 per cent currently, which constituted 26.8 per cent of the total budget. Tracking of expenditure on women's empowerment would improve under the new system being developed by the Ministry of Finance; that in turn would facilitate more targeted spending in the future. Widows were entitled to receive their husbands' pensions, and efforts were under way to include women as recipients of microcredit and bank loans.

35. **Ms. Gabr** asked whether elderly, rural, divorced and widowed women could obtain credit, given that they were often living in poverty. She wished to know how the State party planned to enforce the 33 per cent quota for women's political representation and which body was responsible for monitoring progress in that regard. Given that the 50 seats allocated to women in Parliament had not all been filled at the previous election, she wondered to what degree the Government had tried to harness the power of civil society to raise awareness of the need to increase women's political representation.

36. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that the Election Commission was responsible for ensuring that the 33 per cent quota was filled. Women were entitled to receive many social security benefits and training was provided by the Government and NGOs in a bid to enable them to obtain decent employment. While the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs was the lead ministry responsible for women's empowerment and policymaking, many other ministries had women's empowerment programmes with dedicated budgets. The National Council for Women's and Children's Development met annually with the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs to exchange documentation and suggestions.

37. **Ms. Patten** said that, despite the remarkable 7 per cent decrease in violence against women, the level of such violence remained alarming, and some three quarters of incidents apparently went unreported. She therefore wished to know to what extent the Government was engaging with educational institutions, the media, civil society organizations, the National Human Rights Commission and international agencies to find ways of making the measures in place more effective. She asked how the Government was addressing cases of rape, sexual harassment and violence committed against women in the name of religious fatwas; to what extent the Government had intensified its public campaign to eradicate those practices; and whether the campaign was conducted in partnership with all sectors of society. While commending the Government for having adopted the National Action Plan on Violence against Women, the Committee was concerned at reports that the Action Plan had been developed with little consultation and placed scant focus on factors that caused or enabled violence against women. She asked whether the Government was committed to making the elimination of violence against women a national priority, including by fully

adopting the relevant target in the Sustainable Development Goals and integrating that target in national development plans. It would also be useful to know whether there were any plans to revise the Action Plan to incorporate a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to preventing violence against women that would be implemented in cooperation with civil society, development partners and United Nations agencies.

38. She enquired whether there were any plans to adopt a comprehensive national action plan that included more robust measures for identifying, preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence against refugees, asylum seekers and stateless women and girls, including undocumented Rohingya, with a particular focus on strengthening the law enforcement and judicial response and ensuring a better coordinated assistance mechanism for survivors. She wondered whether any efforts were being made to investigate the extent of sexual and gender-based violence against indigenous women and girls in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and how effective the justice system was in addressing such violence. She would like to know what steps were being taken to ensure that judges, law enforcement officers and all relevant stakeholders were adequately trained on the proper implementation of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act; and what budget allocation had been made for that Act's implementation.

39. It would likewise be useful to learn what steps were being taken to ensure that accurate, systematic and comprehensive data on violence against women and girls, disaggregated by age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, the nature of the alleged crime and the status of the police report, were collected and analysed; what measures were in place to ensure that survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, their relatives and witnesses were protected against intimidation or harassment; whether the Government planned to conduct a full, impartial and independent investigation into all alleged cases of sexual and gender-based violence and to develop and implement a programme guaranteeing access to health care, psychological assistance and other support for survivors of gender-based violence; and, if so, to what extent the Government was developing the programme in partnership with survivors, NGOs and indigenous peoples' organizations.

40. **The Chair**, speaking in her capacity as an expert and commending the State party for the progress it had made since the previous dialogue with the Committee, notably in adopting the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, said that she would appreciate information on the time frame for adoption of the rules of procedure for that Act's implementation and the establishment of the court that would deal with trafficking crimes, and additional information on the resources allocated for implementation. She asked whether there were enough shelters in the State party to accommodate all victims of trafficking and their dependents; whether the Government subsidized NGOs that worked with victims of trafficking; and whether effective measures had been taken to enforce the provision of the Act that required victims of trafficking to be repatriated. She would welcome the delegation's comments on reports that unregistered refugee women and Rohingya women were often excluded from the safeguards provided for in the Act owing to ignorance on the part of law enforcement officers, and asked whether efforts were being made to enhance the protection afforded to all victims of trafficking, regardless of their registration status.

41. She would like to know what measures the State party was taking to protect women in prostitution from abuse and human rights violations, and what steps the State party had taken to reduce demand for prostitution and to assist women and girls engaged in prostitution.

42. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that the Government's efforts to prevent violence against women were focused on strengthening women and enabling them to become independent by providing them with educational and vocational training opportunities.



43. **Mr. Abul Hossain** (Bangladesh) said that the Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence against Women involved six ministries, with the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs playing a coordinating role. Under the Programme, campaigns had been run nationwide to raise awareness of the effects of violence against women and where women should go to seek help. The one-stop crisis centres that had been opened in several hospitals provided victims of violence with access to police officers, lawyers, nurses and doctors under one roof. Rape victims were provided with DNA profiling services; a national trauma counselling centre had been established; nine regional and one district trauma counselling centres were due to open in 2016; and efforts were being made to develop a national trauma counselling policy and to extend the services offered at the current centre nationwide.

44. The initial National Action Plan on Violence against Women was currently under review with a view to making more effective use of available resources. Many NGOs were involved in the Plan's implementation. Data concerning violence against women were collected by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and several ministries. Efforts were under way to introduce counselling services in all schools and in other forums nationwide.

45. The Government did not discriminate between women working as prostitutes within brothels and those working elsewhere. All such women received equal treatment in hospitals, police stations and in the NGO community. Any cases of harassment or discrimination that came to the attention of the Government were addressed. Measures were being taken by several NGOs and the Ministry of Social Welfare to improve respect for the human rights of women working in prostitution.

46. **Mr. Das** (Bangladesh) said that the draft rules of procedure for implementation of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act had been sent to the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs in January 2016. For ease of understanding and implementation, the Ministry had decided to separate the rules into three sections, but no substantive changes had been made. The amended text was currently under consideration by the Ministry of Home Affairs and would be finalized in the near future.

47. **Mr. Mohammad Shafiqur Rahman** (Bangladesh) said that there were some 30,000 registered Rohingya and over 300,000 undocumented citizens of Myanmar currently residing in Bangladesh. Despite the fact that Bangladesh had not ratified the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the Government was working in partnership with the International Organization for Migration to meet the basic needs of those people, providing health care, shelter, food and education, while the local police and government authorities provided for their safety and security.

48. Bangladesh and India had signed a memorandum of understanding on human trafficking. The Government of Bangladesh and NGOs worked together in the Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation and Integration Task Force. When NGOs identified a victim of trafficking in another country they informed the Government, which arranged for repatriation and, again with NGO assistance, for rehabilitation.

49. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had support measures in place for women working as prostitutes and that NGOs and traditional organizations stepped in to help with the education of children born to women working as prostitutes. In general, the level of specialized medical and other services provided to those women meant that conditions were better for them in Bangladesh than in other Asian countries, where, for example, rates of HIV/AIDS were higher.

50. Efforts to eliminate violence were assisted by the speed at which news now travelled: incidents were rapidly reported and action could be taken immediately. A helpline had also been set up.

51. **Ms. Zou Xiaogiao** said that, despite government initiatives, negative attitudes to women and girls were still prevalent, impeding women's participation in the labour market and decision-making processes. Practices that still persisted, such as dowry and gender-based violence, had their roots in discriminatory social norms that valued men and devalued women. She wondered what measures were in place to limit stereotyping and harmful practices, and whether the State party had any comprehensive strategies, such as education or awareness-raising for the general public, that would help create an environment conducive to gender equality.

52. **Ms. Schulz** said that, as she understood it, sex workers and their children found themselves in a difficult situation, suffering stigmatization and various forms of discrimination, violence and abuse, including extortion and threats of being reported to the police. Sex workers were denied access to health and other services, and deprived of the protection that should be available to them as citizens of Bangladesh. She would like to know whether the State party intended to implement the guidance provided by the Supreme Court in its decision of March 2000 in *Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) v. Government of Bangladesh* regarding the protection of sex workers against illegal eviction from brothels and so-called rescue operations that actually deprived women of their homes, workplace and belongings; how it planned to fight abuse and discrimination against sex workers and their children and guarantee them a life of dignity, with access to all the health, social and other services that were in principle open to all citizens; and whether it planned to monitor the manner in which police and judicial officers applied the law and regulations in order to ensure they could be held accountable if they abusively criminalized the activities of sex workers or extorted money by threatening to bring charges against them.

53. **Ms. Patten** asked whether the law would be amended to criminalize marital rape. She would appreciate answers to her questions on fatwas and violence committed in the name of religious fatwas, and on Rohingya women's and girls' inequality under the law inasmuch as the authorities were failing to protect them from oppression. She wondered whether an independent and impartial investigation was envisaged into alleged cases of sexual and gender-based violence against indigenous women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. She would also like details regarding access to health care, psychological assistance and other support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including, in particular, for persons belonging to vulnerable groups such as indigenous and Dalit women and women with disabilities.

54. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that the Government had identified poverty, lack of education and security issues as the principal factors in child marriage. The Ministry of Labour and Employment and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had launched training programmes to raise awareness of girls' importance in families. NGOs also ran programmes to raise awareness of issues around child marriage, dowry and reproductive health. Once adolescent girls had become aware of those issues, they in turn imparted their knowledge to their peers in youth clubs. In that way, it became possible to resist child marriage, for example. In general, once girls had attained a certain level of education, discriminatory attitudes changed. The Government supported girls' education; in fact there were more girls than boys in primary school.

55. Whereas in the past it had been considered impossible for a woman to be raped within marriage because the husband's rights prevailed, victims of marital rape were now able to seek justice and obtain support.

56. The use of fatwas was declining, partly because they were sometimes applied inappropriately, to problems that they could not solve. The Government did not support the issuance of fatwas and was trying to put a stop to the practice.

57. **Mr. Saha** (Bangladesh) said that all sex workers were properly supported by health-care agencies, which cooperated with NGOs in distributing condoms and medicines where needed. At the district, city and local levels, sex workers were registered and their health was monitored. Similar arrangements were available under the National AIDS/STD Programme.

58. **Mr. Abul Hossain** (Bangladesh) said that government agencies, NGOs and civil society were working together to change stereotypes. Numerous initiatives had been taken, each one dedicated to raising awareness of a single issue, such as the notion that girls and boys were equal and, in respect of gender-based violence, the idea that the victims of such violence were not those at fault. It was possible to bring about great change in private and social life by sharing such messages among ordinary people.

59. In the past, victims of gender-based violence and members of their families had been reluctant to report incidents. Now it was more likely that cases would be brought before the legal authorities. In cases of abuse of ethnic women and girls, the authorities were able to bring proceedings *ex officio*.

60. Fatwas were religious opinions and had no legal standing.

#### *Articles 7 to 9*

61. **Ms. Gabr** said that, although some women had reached the highest levels of government, that was not the case in political parties generally or in local government. She noted that the number of women candidates in recent local government elections had not been as high as might have been expected, in part because of political unrest and in some cases violence, but also because certain parties were unwilling to put forward women candidates. In that connection, she asked what possibilities the delegation saw for improving women's participation in local elections and local government; and what measures might be taken to ensure that indigenous women were able to participate in local government and international conferences. She would appreciate figures showing the extent of women's presence in local government, foreign postings, the judiciary and official media. She further noted that two university vice-chancellors were women; how many universities were there in total in Bangladesh?

62. **Ms. Schulz** asked what the time frame was for the revision and adoption of the Citizenship Act. Would the revised version ensure that the conditions for transfer of Bangladeshi citizenship to a foreign spouse were the same whether the Bangladeshi citizen was male or female? Referring to the 2009 amendment to the Citizenship Act, she said that Bangladeshi women married to foreign men had difficulty passing their citizenship on to their children, unlike Bangladeshi men married to foreign women. She would like to know what the situation was in practice and whether it affected certain groups of women more than others; how many children might have been made stateless as a result; how the State party planned to address the problem; and whether the 2009 amendment would apply retroactively to children born before that date.

63. She would like to know how the State party planned to ensure full and non-discriminatory implementation, in particular with respect to the children of marginalized groups, of section 4 of the Act, which stipulated that all persons born in Bangladesh would become a Bangladeshi citizen by birth.

64. Despite the commendable progress made since the adoption of the 2004 Births and Deaths Registration Act, still only 3 per cent of children were registered at birth, whereas the registration rate for children of school age was 88 per cent. There was thus a gap of some years, between children's birth and the time they started school, during which they might not have proper access to health and social services. She would like to know what specific obstacles needed to be overcome in order to ensure that all children were registered

at birth and were thus immediately entitled to all services. Were there big differences in registration rates between urban and rural and remote areas? And were all Rohingya children systematically registered at birth, regardless of whether their parents were among the registered Rohingya living in camps or the undocumented Rohingya not living in camps and subject to the Foreigners Act of 1946?

65. Given the protective role played by birth registration in opening up access to services and documentation, she would like to know what priority the State party accorded, and what resources it allocated, to its universal birth registration strategy.

66. **Ms. Afroze** (Bangladesh) said that there was a large number of universities in Bangladesh.

67. **Mr. Alam** (Bangladesh) said that the State party was setting up a birth registration department and that, once that office was fully operational, there would be no problem in registering all births. Registration rates at birth were lower because most people waited until their children started school to register them. There was no mechanism to register undocumented Rohingya and their children.

68. Since one third of seats in each Union Parishad, or town council, were reserved for women, that gave a total of more than 14,000 women in local government institutions. There were numerous women working in the media as newscasters and commentators, but the Government did not have the exact number and had no data for private television or radio channels.

69. **Mr. Mohammed Shafiqur Rahman** (Bangladesh) said that, according to a 2008 amendment to the citizenship regulations of 1978, the residency requirement for acquisition of Bangladeshi nationality was four years. That rule was still in force and it applied to both male and female foreign spouses of Bangladesh citizens, without discrimination. The new Citizenship Act had not yet been finalized but the residency requirement was to be increased to five years, again applicable to both male and female foreign spouses.

*The meeting rose at 1 p.m.*