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Regional Seminar for Asia-Pacific Parliaments

## Ending the cycle of violence against girls in Asia-Pacific

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Organized by  
the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Parliament of Bangladesh



Bangladesh Parliament

### **CONCLUSIONS OF THE REGIONAL PARLIAMENTARY SEMINAR ON ENDING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS IN ASIA-PACIFIC**

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We, representatives of the parliaments of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Kiribati, Malaysia, Samoa, Tonga and Viet Nam, as well as representatives of national and international organizations, met in Dhaka, Bangladesh, from 23 to 25 September 2014, for a regional seminar on violence against girls. The seminar was jointly organized by the Parliament of Bangladesh and the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

We discussed effective parliamentary responses to violence against girls in terms of legislation and enforcement. We were provided with up-to-date information on the situation in the Asia-Pacific region with special emphasis on the three most prevalent forms of violence against girls in the region - child marriage, sexual violence and domestic violence. The seminar served as a forum for exchanging experiences and good practices.

We agreed that violence against women and girls is one of most prevalent human rights violations that spares no country. It is also an extreme manifestation of unequal power relations between men and women that is deeply entrenched in both the private and public spheres. We reviewed the different data on prevalence of the three forms of violence and their negative consequences, and agreed that - while appalling - the data revealed only a small portion of violations. Scientific evidence indicated that most victims choose not to disclose their ordeal or seek support. We also took note of the high economic and financial costs of violence against girls and women for victims, families, communities, and society as a whole, and agreed to further explore the relevant data and make the case for advocacy and action.

We also agreed that violence against girls and women is a complex issue that requires a comprehensive and inclusive response. We acknowledge that important achievements had been made in the region in terms of legal and policy reforms. However, many challenges and gaps remain, particularly in the areas of comprehensive service provision, funding, access to justice, attitude and traditional norms, which all stood in the way of effective law enforcement. While efforts had been made to bring national legislation in line with international human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), we underscored the fact that even the best legislation could not stand on its own. Accompanying measures across sectors were needed to ensure that legislation and policies had a positive impact on the ground.

Our discussion on child marriage, sexual violence and domestic violence against girls turned to the following questions: What are the key elements of strong legislation? How can effective implementation of legislation be ensured? How can we, as parliamentarians, play a more active role in the implementation process, including assessing the impact of legislation and accompanying measures?

#### **Key elements of effective legislation**

We recognized that legislation is a critical first step in an effective response to violence against girls and women. Given the complexity of the issue, laws should cover a range of relevant aspects and take into account the specific vulnerabilities and needs of girls. As a minimum, legislation should:

- Address and recognize the root causes of violence against girls and women, including ingrained cultural and traditional norms and gender discrimination, the negative and stereotypical portrayal of women in the media and other social and economic factors;
- Clearly set the key parameters it aims to address, including a clear definition of “violence” and its various forms, “girls” and “family”.

- Be based on international standards, on research and evidence; and on the results of a wide and transparent consultation process at the national level to ensure buy-in by all stakeholders;
- Take into account and criminalize all forms of violence against girls and women regardless of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, and if the act of violence is perpetrated in the private or public sphere;
- Address the link between violence against girls and women and HIV-AIDS;
- Be comprehensive and cover both prevention and response, including education; clear and specific provisions on prosecution and sanctions; protection; multi-sector support for victims; and options for remedies;
- Include monitoring mechanisms, a time frame for action and accountability of key sectors for implementation;
- Include mechanisms for sensitizing the public to legislation in clear and accessible language;
- In addition to the foregoing, legislation on child marriage should also include mandatory birth and marriage registration.

### **Priorities in terms of implementation of legislation and policy**

We underscored the fact that implementation is a critical aspect of each piece of legislation. Laws on violence against girls and women have to be accompanied by a resourced action plan or policy at the national level listing actions and indicators that facilitate implementation. We identified the following actions that have to be considered:

- Adopt specific procedures and protocols that do not place the burden of proof on the victims but tackle the cases of violence within the justice system based on victims' rights and protection. Examples of concrete measures include specialized courts, specially trained judges, fast-track procedures, and *in camera* proceedings (no public and media exposure);
- Provide easy, accessible and gender-sensitive support to victims inter alia through a national hotline service, one-stop crisis centres, shelters and protection houses, legal aid and victim advocates;
- Ensure that there is a coordination mechanism for all service providers and those in charge of enforcing legislation (magistrates, security forces, attorneys, health care providers, social workers, women's organizations, etc.);
- Also ensure coordination at the interministerial level;
- Identify mechanisms and institutions at the local and regional levels that should be responsible for law enforcement;
- Build the capacity of and sensitize service providers, including health, police and justice, and hold them accountable for enforcing the law;
- Increase the numbers of women in the judiciary, law enforcement, and the security services;
- End impunity by ensuring that all perpetrators are held to account regardless of their socio-economic status or position;
- Ensure that all public areas are safe for girls and women;
- Organize educational and awareness-raising campaigns at the community level to foster positive changes to social norms and attitudes, in particular targeting men and boys, families and educators;
- Conduct large-scale public awareness campaigns to promote zero tolerance of violence, end the culture of impunity and enhance awareness among girls and women of their rights and available services;
- Work with the education sector to ensure that school curricula include awareness of rights and life-skills training of young people;
- Ensure regular and consistent monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of legislation, including its unintended undesired impact, to ensure that progress is gauged and gaps are translated into improvements;
- Define the role of the media and how they report on the issue;
- In addition to the foregoing, define and implement specific strategies to delay the age of marriage and keep girls in school.

With violence against girls and women being a global problem, it is necessary that global accountability mechanisms regularly gauge progress to end this scourge. For this to happen, it is essential that the post-2015 development agenda include a strong target on ending violence against women and girls based on well-defined indicators.

### **Priority actions for parliaments and parliamentarians**

To provide a strong contribution to the effort to end violence against girls and women, we, as parliamentarians, should fully exercise our roles of law-making, oversight, budgeting and representation. In this endeavour, we can and should:

- Familiarize ourselves with the effect of existing laws and amend laws that have an adverse impact on girls and women;
- Continuously bring the issue of implementation of legislation on ending violence against girls and women to parliament and repeatedly put pressure on government ministries;
- Be agents of change in terms of social norms and attitudes, including on ending child marriage;
- Ensure that all standing committees are engaged in ending violence against women and girls and that cross-party collaboration on the issue exists through a variety of parliamentary mechanisms;
- Initiate and submit petitions; ask written and oral questions to the relevant ministers, from the Prime Minister to the line ministers; move motions in parliament for the government to act or to report regularly to parliament on law and programme implementation;
- Scrutinize budget proposals and campaign with the Minister of Finance to ensure adequate funding and long-term sustainability of programmes to tackle violence against girls and women;
- Engage with and involve all those concerned with implementing legislation - the police, law enforcers, health care providers, social workers, civil society and grassroots organizations, as well as religious and community leaders;
- Encourage men, in particular men parliamentarians and opinion leaders whose role is crucial, to speak out against gender inequality and violence against girls and women;
- Act as positive role models and participate in awareness-raising campaigns outside parliament to ensure that legislation is disseminated, easily accessible and understood by the people;
- Participate in the work of relevant mechanisms at the local level to consult relevant stakeholders and the public, meet with victims, monitor the implementation of legislation, and expand the sources of information and data required to evaluate progress.

In order to inspire action on violence against girls and women, we will bring this outcome document to the attention of our colleagues in parliament through all possible channels. We also undertake to bring the document to the attention of other relevant stakeholders.

We also urge the IPU to bring our conclusions and recommendations to the attention of the global parliamentary community and ensure follow-up through its programmes and Assemblies.