

Press Release
Institutions Matter: State of Women in Bangladesh 2013

The Unnayan Onneshan, an independent multidisciplinary think-tank, reveals that the violence against women has increased in the country over the years, despite quantitative improvements made in economic and social indicators, owing to institutional rigidities embedded in societal structure, manifesting in unequal power relations between men and women.

The research organisation launched its annual publication titled “Institutions Matter: State of Women in Bangladesh 2013,” first of its kind in the country, coinciding the celebration of International Women’s Day.

The Unnayan Onneshan evinces that the institutional barriers rooted in patriarchal social system have held its sway, amongst others, through increased violence against women. The acid related violence against women has mounted from 88 in 2008 to 97 in 2012 (January-November) with a rate of increase of 2.56 percent per year. The dowry related violence has intensified from 269 in 2008 to 771 in 2012 (January-November) with an annual rate of surge of 46.65 percent while the rape violence has risen with an annual rate of 16.85 percent. 24.45 percent women reported experiencing of any form of intimate partner violence.

“When women start to play a role in decision-making, there is a shift in the power dynamics, which the perpetrators of violence perceive as a threat to their own status and as a result opt for violence,” adds the report.

Pointing out the causes of increased violence, the report argues that the roles and representations of women created in quest for attaining so-called ‘modernity’ have led to commodification of women. “Representations of women, for example in advertising, have tended to highlight so-called beauty, size, physique, sexuality, emotions and relationships, but there is hardly any realisation that there are terrible consequences when women become things,” notes the report.

Referring to muted forms of resistances and women movements surrogated by the politico-power project of neoliberalism as another cause, the report observes that “the rhetoric of mainstreaming women agenda has also served less in the name of more and has reduced a great many women organisations and created many new ones to be contractors and/or implementers of projects.”

Noting that reduction in violence against women requires a multi-pronged strategy of engaging institutions at the realm of politics, economy and society, the report calls for shift from the current approaches.

The report recommends re-visioning of the state from the current form of an enabler to that of a duty bearing one to ensure rights, shifting from the current target-based approach to a one of society-based, to transform from the present trickle down approach

to ensuring equality and fairness, to opt for balanced rural and urban development to reduce regional disparities and calls for citizen's vibrant resistance and movements in the wake of reduced space and manufacturing consent for the status quo by the so-called civil society.

The research organization states that with a decline rate of 3.1 percent per annum between 1990 and 2010, the infant mortality rate in Bangladesh for female might stand at 30 per 1,000 live births in 2015, indicating that the country is well on track to achieve the millennium development goal (MDG) target of 31 per 1,000 live births.

On the other hand, the Unnayan Onneshan adds, maternal mortality ratio in Bangladesh has reduced from 478 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 216 live births per 100,000 live births in 2010 with an annual rate of decrease of 2.7 percent. If this rate continues, the organization projects that maternal mortality ratio might stand at 186 per 100,000 live births by 2015, representing non-achievement of MDG target of 143 per 100,000 live births.

The female literacy has increased from 40.8 percent in 2001 to 53.9 percent in 2010 with an annual rate of 3.57 percent. The women participation in labour market has surged over the years. The percentage of female-headed household during last five years (2005-2010) has risen with an annual increase rate of 4.81 percent. The incidence of poverty among women headed households has dropped from 29.5 percent in 2005 to 26.6 percent in 2010 with an annual rate of 1.97 percent.

The Unnayan Onneshan further states that "these developments are also, to a large extent, caused by compulsions for survival and not outcomes of self-serving assertions of opportunities unleashed by policy reforms such as increased participation of women in the labour force owing to the neoliberal agenda of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation." The ever increasing pressures to sustain, in the context of growing need and decline of familial support, has pushed women to engage in income generating activities, it adds.