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**Committee on the Elimination of  
Discrimination against Women  
Twelfth session**

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**Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of  
Discrimination against Women: Bangladesh**

**Second periodic report**

248. The Committee considered the second periodic report of Bangladesh (CEDAW/C/13/Add.30) at its 220th and 227th meetings, on 26 January and 1 February (see CEDAW/C/SR.220 and 227).

249. In his introductory statement, the representative of Bangladesh said that an updated version of the country's second periodic report had been drafted in order to comply with the general guidelines regarding the form and content of reports and an attempt had been made to provide more information.

250. He explained that, from childhood to old age, women in Bangladesh had been discriminated against by parents, husbands and sons. Social taboos and norms played a decisive role and, from their childhood, women had been considered mainly as child-bearers and housewives without any decision-making power. However, the situation had changed after independence. Women had come out of their households for reasons of economic solvency and survival. The country's per capita income of US\$ 170 was one of the lowest in the world and women's income was much lower than that of men.

251. He indicated that only 24.6 per cent of the population had attained a measurable degree of literacy and of that proportion 32 per cent were males and 68 per cent females. Owing to the lack of control over the growing population, employment was affected. Women's employment was often limited and did not receive the required impetus. Nevertheless, the employment of women in traditional occupations, home-based and otherwise, and in the garment sector had witnessed significant progress in recent years.

252. He explained that since most women lived in rural areas, it was necessary to bring them into the mainstream of the national development process. In 1976, the Government had created the Office of the President's Special Assistant on Women's Affairs, which had helped establish the Bangladesh Jatiyo Mohila Sangtha (National Women's Organization) as a Government-instituted non-governmental organization and women's affairs cell in the Department of Social Welfare. The process of placing women in the mainstream of national development had gained further momentum when the Government set up a separate Ministry of Women's

Affairs, in 1976, and when it established focal points in 15 ministries to work closely with the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

253. The representative said that the First Five-Year Plan (1973/78) had emphasized a welfare-oriented rehabilitation approach; the subsequent Two-Year Plan (1978/80) had emphasized women's development as a central force; and the Second Five-Year Plan (1980/85) had emphasized more dynamic and diversified programmes. Emphasis had been put on women's participation in development activities, expansion of opportunities for specialized training, skill development, provision of credit for income-generating activities, better protection of children and entrepreneurship development programmes. The Third Five-Year Plan (1985/90) had strengthened the activities of previous plans. To achieve the overall integration of women into the development process, the Plan had specific objectives to reduce imbalances between the development of men and women. More emphasis had been given to the expansion of employment and credit facilities, provision of accommodation for job-seeking women, development of leadership and managerial skills, and training. Primary health care, employment and skill training were linked with population control. Implementation strategies had included the establishment of the Supreme Council for Mother and Child, rehabilitation programmes for prostitutes, provision of legal aid for women and strengthening of non-governmental organizations. The year 1990 had been declared "Year of the Girl Child" in order to increase consciousness about the situation of girls in the family. The Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990/95) was aimed at accelerating economic growth, alleviating poverty and increasing self-reliance. Implementation strategies had also included the integration of women into the mainstream of sector-based planning in order to reduce gender disparities. The fourth Plan also gave greater priority to human resource development, including a women's credit programme, promotion of female entrepreneurship, skill development training programmes for different trades, a poverty alleviation programme for women to become involved in income-generating activities, and a vulnerable group development programme for involving destitute women in income-generating activities through the provision of a food subsidy.

254. The representative indicated that positive steps had been taken by the Government to enhance the role of women in agriculture; for instance in the crop diversification programme. In the industrial and manufacturing sectors, women were emerging as a greater force on account of economic pressures and the expanded scope created in various manufacturing industries, such as garments, textiles, electronics, frozen food, packaging and processing.

255. The representative outlined the significant policy measures that had been taken by the Government concerning the equal participation of women in development, which demonstrated the Government's concern in promoting women. The Minister of Women's Affairs was a permanent member of the National Economic Council, which approved all major development projects to ensure that

the legitimate and feasible participation of women was not denied in the development projects and programmes that came before the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council for examination and approval. He explained that the role of non-governmental organizations was to address issues specific to women and to contribute to awareness-raising, technology transfer, development and training for target groups in the country's development process. He named some of the 500 non-governmental organizations concerned.

256. The representative confirmed that the Government of Bangladesh had ratified the Convention with some reservations as some domestic laws were not in conformity with the provisions of the Convention. He also outlined some laws that provided for the special rights of women and that were intended to eliminate discrimination against women, namely, the Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961, amended in 1986; the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, amended in 1986; the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance of 1983; the Family Court Ordinance of 1985; the Child Marriage and Divorce Registration Act of 1974; and the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance of 1992.

257. Concerning the provisions of the Convention and their implementation, the representative said that the Government of Bangladesh attached due importance to the provisions of the Convention and had taken measures to ensure, to the extent possible, the implementation of the Convention.

258. With regard to article 2, the representative said the Constitution had granted equal rights to women in all spheres of life, although some degree of inequality was still recognized. Some provisions of Muslim Personal Law had been modified, but it would not be easy to modify Hindu Personal Law because of the complex religious issues involved.

259. The representative said that the legal system of the country ensured human rights, but some infringements occurred owing to taboos prevalent in society. The representative informed the Committee further that, owing to the increased incidence of poverty, economic aspirations and urbanization, traditional values were disintegrating fast, compelling women to come out of seclusion in order to seek work.

260. Regarding the role of non-governmental organizations, he said that the Government and some non-governmental organizations had undertaken programmes for creating social awareness about the change in women's roles. All training institutions had introduced gender and women-in-development concerns in their training programmes.

261. The representative stated that trafficking in women and children had become a major concern for the Government, which had taken firm steps and made the law severe for such offences. Poverty was one of the main reasons for such trafficking

and the Government had introduced programmes designed to alleviate poverty, particularly in the rural areas.

262. The representative said that, under the Constitution, women were granted equal opportunities for participating in public life. The current Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition were both women. He explained that 30 seats in Parliament were reserved for women, as well as seats on all municipal and local government bodies.

263. Regarding equal opportunities for women to represent Bangladesh at the international level, the representative said that such a need had been recognized by the Government. The law allowed women's representation at the national and international levels. A quota system ensured women's participation in Government service; for example, a quota of 10 per cent of gazetted, and 15 per cent of non-gazetted, posts had been reserved for women.

264. The representative said that nationality in Bangladesh was determined by birth. According to the Citizenship Act, citizenship could be transmitted from a father to his children. Concerning the equal rights of women in the field of education under article 10 of the Convention, the representative said that equal rights for education were highly prominent in Government policies, and one of the objectives of the Fourth Five-Year Plan was universal primary education, non-formal primary education and the reduction of mass illiteracy.

265. Concerning equal employment and training opportunities for women, the representative said that employment opportunities remained unequal, although in the public sector there was a 10 per cent quota of gazetted posts and a 15 per cent quota of non-gazetted posts for women at the entry level. The age-limit for the entry of women into Government service had been raised from 27 to 30 years.

266. Under the fourth Plan, the representative said that efforts were being made to eliminate discrimination against women in health care by strengthening, planning and managing the capabilities for utilizing existing facilities. He also said that under the Plan women's participation in all games and sports was encouraged.

267. With reference to equality before the law, the representative said that the Constitution upheld equal rights for men and women. The fourth Plan emphasized legal education and legal aid to assist women in exercising their rights. The Family Court had helped women to exact justice, and special projects were operating under the Ministry of Women's Affairs to create legal awareness and provide legal aid.

268. The representative explained that issues such as marriage, child custody and property were governed by religious laws and some discriminatory provisions still existed. He stated further that the Council for Mother and Child coordinated child welfare activities, and a number of non-governmental organizations, including

International Federation Terre des Hommes, Save the Children, Underprivileged Children's Educational Programme, and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, were working to promote literacy and the health of children, and to impart vocational training. The non-governmental organizations had established a Child Rights Forum to protect children's rights.

269. The Committee noted that, while the Government of Bangladesh was to be congratulated on the preparation of its second periodic report and on its frankness concerning the many problems facing women in Bangladesh, there were a number of problems with the report. When the initial report had been presented, many questions had been posed to the government representative. Some of those had been answered but many had been left unanswered on the understanding that the second periodic report would provide the information needed. The unanswered questions had not been commented on in the second periodic report nor had it followed the general guidelines regarding the form and content of reports and there were many gaps in the information provided. Members of the pre-session working group said that they had had some difficulties in reviewing the second periodic report because the information provided was inadequate. They indicated further that they might be overcritical of the report but they had no other means owing to the gaps in the information provided.

270. In replying to the comments of the Committee, the representative regretted that, at the time of the Committee's review, the updated second periodic report, which had been formulated according to the guidelines of the Committee and provided more information, had not been available.

271. The representative said that the Government was reducing the gender gap and putting women in the mainstream of the economy; namely, allowing them access to employment in all sectors of the economy, both traditional and non-traditional, which was the major strategy for increasing their contribution. He indicated that the gender gap could gradually be reduced by giving women appropriate training to improve their skills; providing them with employment on a priority basis and with credit on easy terms for self-employment in house-based and out-of-home activities; improving medical and other ancillary facilities for women; making men and women aware of the need and justification for elevating women's position in society; influencing public opinion in their favour; and enacting laws to halt discriminatory practices.

272. Replying to the questions compiled by the pre-session working group, the representative said that his Government had pledged, both at the national and local levels, to remove gender disparities, on the basis of not only humanitarian considerations but also sheer economics. He added that the contribution of women to the economy had to be increased in order to accelerate the pace of development.

### Questions of a general nature

273. A question was raised whether the Government of Bangladesh intended to avail itself of the assistance available from national and international women's organizations in the preparation of its periodic reports. The representative said that the updated second report had been prepared by the experts of the Government machinery. The Government would endeavour in future to avail itself of the assistance of other local experts for the preparation of similar reports.

274. In replying to the question whether the Fourth Five-Year Plan had had an impact on the status of women in Bangladesh, the representative said that the Plan had been referred to in the updated second periodic report of Bangladesh and policy measures regarding the placing of women in the mainstream had been incorporated in the Plan. The need to reduce gender disparities had been stressed, and the implementation of projects concerning women had been outlined. The implementation of projects along those lines had had a definite impact on the status of women in Bangladesh.

275. The Committee noted that, during the presentation of the initial report to the Committee at its sixth session, the representative had told the Committee that the reservations to article 2, article 13 (a) and article 16, paragraph 1 (c) and (f), of the Convention would be dealt with and it wished to know what had been done about that. The Committee also asked the Government to study article 2 of the Convention with a view to including in its subsequent reports its comments on the legislation or other structures that were preventing it from implementing that article. The Committee asked what proposals the Government had for withdrawing its reservation, which appeared to contravene articles 27, 28 and 29 of the Constitution of Bangladesh. The representative explained that the Government had ratified the Convention with some reservations on article 2, article 13 (a) and article 16, paragraph 1 (c) and (f), because the provisions of personal law could not be changed easily, as they were based on religion. However, some provisions of Muslim personal law had been modified.

276. Concerning measures to improve the situation of women, the representative pointed to the ministries for agriculture, industry, health and family welfare, rural development and cooperatives, local government, social welfare, and labour and manpower, which all had their own projects on women's issues. He concluded by saying that, through the collective efforts of the Government, non-governmental organizations and international bodies, the goal of eliminating discrimination against women would soon be realized.

## Questions related to specific articles

### Article 2

277. The Committee observed that the application of personal laws was based on the different social and cultural practices of ethnic and religious groups, which appeared to result in discrimination against women in health, education, inheritance and before the law. The Committee asked whether the State had made a move to identify all personal laws that were discriminatory. The representative stated that no discriminatory practices existed in providing facilities in the areas of health education and all persons were equal before the law. Discriminatory practices due to personal law had been identified.

278. The representative said that the reasons for discrimination because of personal laws had been explained earlier and such practices had been identified.

279. Referring to the system of redress for women covered by personal law, the representative confirmed that any aggrieved woman could turn to the court to assert her rights regarding divorce and custody of a child.

280. In answering the question whether personal law was the only area in which religious and ethnic laws remained intact and whether in other legal fields (criminal, contractual and civil) women's rights were governed by a single general law, the representative stated that men and women were governed by the same laws in respect of criminal, contractual and civil laws.

281. The Committee wished to know how the Government of Bangladesh intended to reconcile its constitutional guarantees of equality before the law to all citizens and its ratification of the Convention with the exception of the discriminatory practices remaining under personal laws. The representative replied that the Parliament and the Supreme Court were competent to resolve any conflict between the constitutional provision of equality and personal law.

282. The Committee noted that all measures taken to establish family courts, dowry prohibition, the Muslim Family Law Ordinance, the Child Marriage Act and other legislation were important for the promotion of equality for women. Questions were raised as to whether those measures had improved the situation of women in Bangladesh and whether the establishment of a high-powered advisory council was intended to facilitate that process. The representative explained that accurate data had not yet been compiled; however, he confirmed that such legislation had improved the overall situation of women and that the high-powered advisory council, headed by the Prime Minister, was intended to give strong support to the process.

### Article 3

283. In replying to questions concerning the measures taken to ensure the full development and advancement of women, such as separating the issue of the rights and status of women from religious practices, the representative said that sufficient measures for improving the status of women had been adopted and were outlined in the Fourth Five-Year Plan, which was the responsibility of all development ministries. Non-governmental organizations were also involved in similar work.

284. Referring to measures to protect the legal rights of the 15 per cent of non-Muslim women in Bangladesh, the representative said that non-Muslim women were treated on a par with Muslim women except in areas covered by their respective personal laws.

### Article 4

285. The Committee noted that 10 per cent of all gazetted and 15 per cent of all non-gazetted public service posts were reserved for women and asked to what extent those quotas had been filled. The representative explained that, in order to increase women's participation in the public sector, the Government had introduced a quota system in 1976, at the entry level in the public sector. Currently however, women occupied about 5 per cent of the officer positions, 12 per cent of the staff positions and 3 per cent of the lower blue-collar-worker positions.

### Article 5

286. The Committee observed that the Government of Bangladesh was to be commended on its enactment of laws to prevent violence and trafficking in women. In information from non-governmental organizations, however, it had been stated that, according to research, women were more likely to die from violence than from childbirth. Questions were asked on the extent to which the problem of violence against women contributed to the diminished life expectancy of women. The representative explained that the incidence of such crimes was not so high as to have a strong impact on the average life expectancy of Bangladeshi women. The life expectancy of women was lower than that of men because women suffered more than men from the scourge of poverty, particularly in the rural and poor remote areas.

287. The Committee asked whether the incidence of death or injury in dowry disputes had been reduced since the enactment of the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance of 1983, whether those committing such offences were routinely tried and whether the rate of prosecution had changed since the presentation of the initial report. The representative said that, after enactment of the Ordinance, the incidence of death or injury had decreased. Those who



committed such offences were tried in court and the rate of prosecution had increased.

288. In reply to a question on female circumcision, the representative said that circumcision was never a part of Bangladeshi culture and it had never been practised in the country.

289. Concerning the level of violence against women in Bangladesh, the representative stated that accurate data were not available; however, a few sample surveys had been conducted in order to calculate the probable number of cases. Concerning the measures introduced to protect women against violence in the home, the representative said that a pilot project entitled "Support to battered women" had been launched by the Ministry of Women's Affairs to provide shelter and legal assistance for battered women.

290. Regarding the measures taken in schools and at the workplace to depict women as equal to men, the representative indicated that equality in all respects was maintained in schools and workplaces for both men and women.

291. Replying to the question whether the quota system of reserving posts for women was not reinforcing sex-stereotyping in employment, the representative indicated that the quota was applicable to all posts at the entry level; however, there was no bar to the employment of women in any posts on a merit basis. The quota system had not led to sex-stereotyping in employment. Asked about plans to introduce a quota system in other fields of employment, he explained that there was currently no plan to introduce a quota system in the private sector; women were employed in large numbers in the private sector, particularly in the garment, fish processing, packaging and electronic industries.

#### Article 6

292. In answering a question on measures to rehabilitate prostitutes to reduce the numbers of women who were compelled to earn their living through prostitution on account of poverty and unemployment, the representative indicated that there were a few programmes for giving prostitutes, salvaged from red-light areas, skill training for gainful employment and ultimately to rehabilitate them in society. The programmes had been undertaken by both the Government and some non-governmental organizations, but their success had been very modest. In reply to a question on rehabilitation programmes, he said that a proposal for making the scheme more effective was on the anvil. He said that people guilty of exploiting women for prostitution were charged under the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance of 1983.

#### Article 7

293. The Committee noted that 30 seats in the national legislature were reserved for women and wished to know whether that provision had been effective in increasing respect for women politicians and whether those women were given responsible tasks in Government. The representative confirmed that both the Prime Minister, who was the head of Government, and the Leader of the Opposition were women. In addition to the Minister of State, two women had been appointed to the present Cabinet.

294. Questioned about the total number of seats in the national legislature and how many of them were held by women, the representative said that there were 330 seats in the national parliament, of which 37 were held by women.

295. Concerning the age of franchise, the representative said that any person aged 18 years or more, irrespective of sex, colour and creed, was entitled to register as a voter. About 40 per cent of the eligible women voters cast a vote, and there was no traditional opposition to their doing so.

296. With regard to the proportion of women to men in the legal profession and in all branches of the judiciary, and positive measures to train and recruit women in those professions, the representative indicated that there were approximately 400 to 500 women lawyers in the country. The number of women in the judicial service was also increasing gradually. Positive measures had been taken to train and recruit women in the legal professions.

#### Article 8

297. In answering a question on the number of women diplomats, the representative said that there were about 10 career women diplomats.

#### Article 9

298. The Committee noted that it had received information from a non-governmental organization to the effect that a child born in a foreign country to a Bangladeshi woman and a non-Bangladeshi man could not be given the nationality of the mother, whereas a child born in a foreign country to a Bangladeshi man and a non-Bangladeshi woman could be given the father's nationality. The Committee wanted to know whether measures were planned to amend that provision so as to comply with article 9 of the Convention. The representative replied that some women's organizations had taken up the issue.

## Article 10

299. Asked whether primary education for girls was compulsory, the representative said that primary education for girls was compulsory. He further indicated that, to encourage girls to study beyond the primary level, there were provisions for the free education of girls up to class VIII in all parts of the country except for the metropolitan areas. The Government had also increased educational facilities by providing more girls schools in rural areas; 60 per cent of Government primary-school teachers' posts were reserved for women.

300. Concerning the percentage of scholarships granted to girls rather than boys, the representative explained that girls were receiving a higher percentage of scholarships compared with boys at all levels of education; however, an accurate figure was not available. He said that a separate development scheme for the allocation of scholarships to secondary schools would be implemented during the Fourth Five-Year Plan to encourage the education of girls. In addition, under the scheme of internal scholarships for general education, 40 per cent were reserved for girls. In 1992, that scholarship programme had succeeded in almost doubling female enrolment in secondary schools, as well as in promoting a higher level of women's participation in the labour force leading to later marriage and lower fertility.

301. The Committee noted that, in 1984/85, 66 per cent of females compared with 49 per cent of males had no access to education. One fifth of females and one quarter of males had education up to class IV but only 9 per cent of females, compared with 18 per cent of males, went beyond class V. Members asked what the comparable figures were for girls in education for the period 1987-1992. The representative indicated that a comparative figure for girls in education for that period was provided in annex III to the updated second periodic report.

302. In replying to a question on the current literacy rates for females and whether it had improved from the 19 per cent recorded in 1985, the representative said that the current literacy rate for females was 16 per cent, and the figure of 19 per cent, recorded in the report of the pre-session working group, was not correct.

303. Regarding the percentage of women students in traditional male-dominated courses and the measures taken to encourage women to enrol in those courses, the representative said that women were currently participating in all traditional male-dominated courses.

304. Referring to a question on the provision of information on family planning to girls at school, the representative indicated that indirect information was provided regarding the population of the country.

305. The Committee noted that urban women had a greater chance (20 per cent compared with 8 per cent of rural women) of continuing their education to class X. It wanted to know whether the Government had introduced measures to improve rural women's access to education. The representative indicated that free schooling for girls up to class VIII had been introduced in rural areas. Moreover, scholarships were also awarded to encourage the education of girls.

306. The Committee inquired whether, given the high rate of female illiteracy, which had reached 90 per cent and which did not make it possible for women to improve their status, the Government was developing, or planning to develop, a national literacy campaign aimed specifically at women. The representative explained that there was no such campaign, but there was a national mass education programme. However, the Government planned to educate all its citizens by the year 2000. The representative explained further that non-formal education had been introduced under the Ministry of Women's Affairs, other government departments and some non-governmental organizations to improve women's access to better jobs.

#### Article 11

307. In replying to the question whether the Constitution forbade discrimination against women, the representative said that women had equal access with men to employment, and equal pay for equal work was granted by the Government.

308. Asked whether government policy guaranteed maternity leave to women, the representative confirmed that, in the Government and formal sector, women were allowed to take paid maternity leave for three months twice during their period of service (up to the age of 57). However, in the private and informal sector, that provision had not yet been ensured as those sectors were not bound to follow government regulations. He indicated further that women employed in the food-for-work programmes in construction, repair and maintenance work were paid the same as men. He also informed the Committee that the disproportionate underrepresentation of women in wage employment was decreasing gradually, and there had been an increase in the number of women engaged in higher paid employment since 1987.

#### Article 12

309. The Committee noted that rural women's life expectancy was much lower than that of urban women. The Committee wished to know what measures were being taken to improve health standards for rural women. The representative explained that health-service coverage had been extended and health awareness on the part of women had been increased because of the expansion of health infrastructure facilities, particularly at the rural level, and the dissemination of information on health through various channels. Maternal and child health care

through the establishment of health complexes and family welfare centres had been strengthened and family planning programmes had been expanded.

310. The Committee noted further that the Government had identified the overwhelming problem of population explosion as one of the factors precluding the achievement of equal rights for women. It wanted to know whether the objective of a population growth rate of 1.8 per cent by 1990 had been achieved. The representative replied that it had not; however, the Government had given due emphasis to health and family planning programmes and services. Population control programmes were separate from the health services so as to intensify the activities to control the rapid population growth. He also confirmed that the birth rate for rural women was different from that of urban women. The representative stated further that family planning information was offered to all Bangladeshi women and the measures used were scientific. The practice of abortion was not yet permissible but, under special circumstances, menstruation regulation was allowed.

311. Concerning the annual per capita health expenditure and whether the money was spent equally on women and men, the representative indicated that the annual per capita health expenditure currently stood at 29 taka. Health expenditure was equal for men and women, and no extra allocation in the health sector was made for women. He indicated further that small land holdings, low levels of education, small incomes and large families were the underlying general causes of malnutrition affecting both women and children. Other causes included poor sanitation, lack of proper health education, non-availability of safe drinking water, poor cooking practices, general misconceptions about food and bad eating habits. He also said that malnutrition was linked with poverty and efforts were being made to raise the level of household income. The Government had created additional opportunities for the gainful employment of females, through promoting cottage industries, food-for-work programmes and, where possible, redistributing productive resources. The Government also organized appropriate training programmes for rural women, teaching them the techniques of kitchen gardening, pond fishery, backyard poultry farming, plantation of fruit trees, goat and cattle raising, and the small-scale preservation of various food items, such as fruit and vegetables. Nutrition education was also imparted through primary and secondary schools and the mass media. Rehabilitation centres for severely malnourished children had also been established. Such centres were providing nutrition education and food supplements to pregnant women and lactating mothers and supplying suitable weaning food to the children.

312. The representative said that there was no problem with the health system because, even in the remote areas, there were enough doctors. Concerning the discrimination of the girl child, he said that the preference for boys did exist but, with more education, such a tradition was changing gradually.

313. The representative noted that there was no incidence of AIDS in Bangladesh, either among men or women.

#### Article 13

314. The Committee noted that the Government of Bangladesh had made a reservation on article 13 (a) of the Convention and wished to know what measures had been taken to withdraw it. The representative indicated that the wives and children of government personnel and other pensionable employees were entitled to receive the gratuity, pension, group insurance, benevolent fund etc. of husbands or fathers who had completed 10 years of service.

#### Article 14

315. The representative informed the Committee that women had equal access to credit for their economic activities. The Government had a mandate to distribute land equally between men and women. The Committee wished to know what measures had been taken to ensure that women obtained their equal share of land in view of reports that almost all newly reclaimed land was going to male owners. The representative said that no such information had been received. He stated further that where ideal villages had been set up by allocating government land to poor landless families, such land was jointly registered in the name of the husband and wife.

316. Asked what measures had been introduced in the past five years to improve the health education of rural women and what specific measures were being taken to increase rural women's access to education, the representative said that the Government was taking all the measures within its resources to improve the health and education of rural women. The Committee noted that rural women's access to education was only 30 per cent and that of urban women was 64 per cent.

#### Article 15

317. The representative informed the Committee that women were able to give evidence in court.

#### Article 16

318. The Committee observed that there were different laws for Muslim, Hindu and Christian women concerning inheritance. According to the Hindu religion, a woman had no right to property, financial independence and to be self-supporting. The Committee wished to know whether there was a proposal to ensure that all Bangladeshi women had equal rights in inheriting property. The representative replied that no proposal had been initiated by the Government to change the personal laws of different religious communities.

319. The Committee also observed that the Government of Bangladesh had enacted progressive legislation in the area of marriage and family law; however, there appeared to be provisions under religious laws for polygamy, easier access to divorce for men and discrimination against women in the right to the custody of their children. The Committee inquired whether there were proposals for the enforcement of equal rights in marriage and family law for women and men. The representative replied that men and women had an equal right to seek redress in a court of law regarding their rights in marriage, polygamy and the custody of children according to the existing law of the country.

320. In answering the questions concerning how many cases of murder and attempted murder for dowry, rape, violence against women and disfiguration by acid had been reported, the representative stated that accurate figures were not available. However, the Anti-Terrorism Act recently passed by the Government had helped in reducing those crimes.

321. Asked whether polygamy was accepted by Muslim people and whether there was a movement against it, the representative indicated that it was not generally accepted and there was a strong movement by women activists against polygamy.

322. The Committee observed that since the Child Marriage Act of 1984, the age for marriage of Bangladeshi women was 18 years. The 1981 census showed that 7 percent of girls in the 10-14 age group were married and the mean age of marriage was 17.9 years. The Committee wanted to know whether the Government had prosecuted those men marrying girls under the age of 18 years, and whether there had been an increase in the mean age of marriage. The representative stated that, owing to illiteracy and poverty, child marriage was still to some extent prevalent but the Government was taking all possible measures to punish the offenders.

323. Concerning the right of unmarried mothers to the custody of their children and to obtain support from the father of the children, the representative indicated that the children of unmarried women were not recognized in Bangladesh. He also informed the Committee that husbands were legally bound to provide maintenance to their wives for up to three months after the pronouncement of divorce.

324. Regarding the question whether Bangladeshi men supported their children as required by personal law, and whether measures could be taken to obtain and enforce support for children during and after marriage, the representative said that, according to personal law, fathers were obliged to support their children. In the case of fathers failing to give support to their children, the guardian of the children could go to court for their legal rights.

### Concluding observations

325. The Committee thanked the representative of Bangladesh for providing detailed and frank explanations. The Committee noted that some problems being faced by women in Bangladesh were based on personal laws, which included religious and customary practices. Members of the Committee expressed their concern over the reservations made on article 2, article 13 (a) and article 16, paragraph 1 (c) and (f), of the Convention. Others requested more information on issues concerning the awareness of women regarding their legal rights, legal aid, the effective measures taken concerning personal laws of the Hindu religion or of other minority groups, the participation of women in the public sector and violence. Emphasis was placed on issues such as education, illiteracy, health (especially infant mortality), the role of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, its budget and responsibility concerning the projects, and the temporary measures taken to improve the situation of women.

326. In its concluding observation, the Committee commended the efforts the Government was making, despite its difficulties, to strengthen the role of women in the development process. The Chairperson expressed her concern regarding the health situation of women in Bangladesh and the way in which the Government provided health services to the affected women and children. She emphasized health education, including family planning and literacy. She hoped that the Government of Bangladesh would be able to show the best possible results in its third periodic report.