

National Women Development Policy

Bangladesh: Review body opposes equal rights for women

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Mullah driven review body finds equal rights for women “very objectionable”. Recommends deletion of 6 provisions, change in 15 in National Women Development Policy.

Star Report

The ulema committee formed to review the National Women Development Policy has strongly opposed equal rights to women, recommending deletion of six sections of the policy and amending 15 others as they said these sections “clash” with the provisions of the Quran and Sunnah.

There are several sections in the policy which are “very objectionable”, said Mufti Mohammad Nuruddin, acting khatib of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque who headed the review committee.

"A woman cannot enjoy rights equal to a man's because a woman is not equal to a man by birth. Can there be two prime ministers—one male and one female—in a country at the same time?"
Nuruddin told *The Daily Star* after submitting the seven-page report to Law and Religious Affairs Adviser AF Hassan Ariff yesterday.

The 20-member committee asked the government to clarify the phrase “*women's equal rights to earned movable and immovable properties*” and follow Islamic provisions on inheritance if the earned properties include inherited properties.

Suggesting inclusion of guidelines “*in the light of the Quran and Sunnah*” while taking any decision regarding women's rights, the ulema recommended abolishing the section that suggests steps to implement the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Asking the government to withdraw Bangladesh from the convention, they said many sections in it go against the belief, spirits and culture of the Muslim ummah.

The ulema committee also opposed and asked the government to eliminate the provision for keeping reserved seats for women in parliament and local government bodies and direct elections to those.

"This policy has strongly hurt the pious Muslims of the country since many sections of it clash with the Quran and Sunnah...It does not go with Bangladesh's constitution, religious traditions and culture," the report concludes.

Adviser Hassan Ariff expressed hopes that the recommendations will remove the "*language or interpretation gap*" created surrounding the Women Development Policy.

The committee members did not support the attempts by a section of opportunists to create chaos by taking advantage of the situation, he told reporters.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee said 15 sections of the National Women Development Policy are against Islam and should be revised or corrected while six sections should be eliminated.

The Islamic scholars said not only is it impossible to establish equal rights for men and women in the country, but in some cases, giving women equality would deprive them of their rights in many sectors.

They proposed replacing the phrase "*equality, equal rights and affirmative action*" with "*just rights*".

The committee also said the ambition of eradicating "*existing disparities between women and men*" is unclear and should be replaced by the phrase "*existing disparities between women and men in light of the Quran and the Sunnah*".

On the section that asks for giving women equal human and fundamental rights such as political, economic, social and cultural, they said "*just rights*" should be ensured for men and women in

light of the Quran and Sunnah.

They said the government must ensure participation of ulema and muftis alongside women's law experts while drawing up or eliminating or amending any "*existing discriminatory*" law.

They proposed inclusion of religion experts in a committee to resolve any inconsistency regarding women's interest arising from misinterpretations of provisions of those religions.

They also opposed the provision of a child's being identified by both the mother and father, saying it "*encourages sexual abuse*" and pre-marital cohabitation. They recommended identifying a child by "*legally married*" parents.

The committee observed that the policy's proposed penalty for child marriages is not in line with Islamic policy as the legal marriage age of 18 should not apply here because Islam states that a girl can be married as soon as she has "*come of age*".

It recommended replacing the phrase "*child marriage*" of the section concerned with "*discourage underage marriage*".

The committee opposed inclusion of women in peacekeeping missions, saying it would make women insecure and it could tarnish Bangladesh's image. The ulema proposed cancelling the provision.

They also opposed the provision that women "*must be given equal opportunities and participation in wealth, employment, market and business*", saying it clashes with the Quran's teachings. They proposed giving women equal opportunities and participation in these sectors in light of religious dictums.

The committee specifically said one's inheritance rights should be determined by their own religions.

The ulema asked the government to cancel the initiative to reserve one-third parliamentary seats for women to increase women's participation in parliament and its application in local elections.

A few Islamist parties started staging

demonstrations immediately after the chief adviser announced the National Women Development Policy 2008 on March 8.

On March 11, the law adviser told the ulema that the caretaker government had not passed any law regarding inheritance and there is nothing that contradicts the Quran and Sunnah.

The next day, Women and Children Affairs Adviser Rasheda K Choudhury asked people to refrain from unnecessary criticism of a progressive document like the policy without going through it.

On March 27, the government formed the 20-member committee to identify inconsistencies in the policy as per Islamic rules and suggest steps.

P.S.

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