

Round Table on Women and HIV/AIDS

In collaboration with The Daily 'Prothom Alo

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Round table on Women and HIV/AIDS: What to do?

As part of sensitizing the civil society on the impending danger of HIV/AIDS and its implications on women, UNDP Bangladesh organised a round table in collaboration with a national Bangla daily named 'Prothom Alo'. The event was attended by many elites of the civil society especially women from different professions. As part of the commitment on social issues, the daily newspaper disseminated the messages to a wider public by publishing the entire proceedings of the round table in a supplementary, dedicated on the issue.

Speakers highlighted different aspects of the gender dimension in tackling the HIV/AIDS menace. The issues that came up are as follows:

- a) **Vulnerability of women** – It was a consensus among the audience that women suffer increased vulnerability owing to their lack of decision making power at home especially on private issues that concern their health and well being. The discussion called upon men to stand by women and pay more attention to this aspect.
- b) **Socio-economic situation** of the society- The speakers opined that the socio-economic condition, trends and practices of the society are also responsible for making women the victims of this deadly disease.
- c) **No taboo in letting people know the essentials**- It was also stressed by many speakers that the common people should be made aware on this issue. This is a real life menace and needs to be handled accordingly.
- d) **Empowerment of women**- This was a common consensus among all the speakers that without women's empowerment, this menace cannot be stopped from spreading. This is more than a health issue where problems are aggravated by the inequalities that exist in access to control over resources by men and women of our society.
- e) **Macro-economic implications**- It came up from the discussion that incidence of HIV/AIDS is also a macro-economic issue as the disease diminished the working capacity of a person long before fatality. In an endemic stage, it can destroy the productivity of a certain age group of population.

Some of the excerpts from the individual speakers are highlighted below:

Motiur Rahman:

“Ignorance of most of our citizen including men –women on this issue, free migration in the border areas of Myanmar, China & India are creating AIDS vulnerability for us. Again women plays more active a role in this area. For this women need to be made aware through the state, society and family. Till now, almost half or a larger portion of AIDS affected people in this world are woman. Therefore, movement against AIDS cannot bring success without creating awareness for women.

This is precisely why we are gathered here. We'll publish your opinion in our newspaper; we'll try to create awareness through newspaper. We don't want to stop our efforts within the proceedings of the round table discussion as it is held today. We will follow it up with your interview, write-ups which we will publish at different times. We'll continue it.

Not only women, rather the whole society needs to be aware. We all should think about its solution. Our politicians, ministers, policy makers, organizations-everybody needs to be aware of

it and give it priority. We want to work on it round the year instead of one day discussion once a year”.

Mukti

“While talking about giving care and support, we urge that people from all walks of the society behave in a positive way with HIV affected persons..... Our services should contain the spread of the disease as well so that there is no new incidence.... Risk is not only for those who are identified as population at risk but also for those of us who are ignoring the existence and magnitude of it....”

Moushumi

“Isolating a HIV positive person from the rest of the society is not at all right... It is normal for a person to suffer from any sickness. AIDS can affect any innocent person... Innocent daughters or women can get affected by their spouses and also through blood transfusion... Media is publishing a lot of information on these. But still why are we have not been able to project the right kind of information and create the empathy of general people....”

Sara Zaker:

“We need to overcome the is uneasiness in every stage in the society while discussing about sexuality of human being... Sexuality is a universal aspect of life. It does not go away if you scold a young boy or girl on this issue.... The elderly members of the family must initiate the discussion.... Television, drama, cinema are producing messages of public service... Celebrities like us are talking.... Once we start talking, people will listen to us...Unless we start to talk about it, there can be no solution”

Dr. Tasnim Azim

“ ...Reports of 2003 and 2004 indicate that in most cases, women were affected by their spouses.... Among the drug users, we do not talk much of the female users. Statistics indicate the presence of 7000 female drug abusers in Dhaka and surrounding areas. But while we rehabilitate, we only work on male abusers Female drug users get less sympathy from the society; they are afraid of the social stigma.... And moreover, they never get to use a fresh syringe... they are always a secondary user....”

Dr. Shirin Haque

“My suggestion is to incorporate women’s empowerment and education issue in our curriculum.... Appropriate teachers are also in need. Otherwise, the whole issue may become negative.... The topic of HIV/AIDS should also come up in the curriculum.... The women’s organisations should work to break the silence and uneasiness in this regard. They can take up community based work... Men can also come up to work with organisations which will be of great help...”

Shahin Sultana:

“When a child is born of an AIDS affected mother, the child has 10-15% percent possibility of being affected... If that child is breast-fed by the affected mother, it does not increase the child’s possibility of being affected. Rather it contains the possibility like any other disease...Mothers

need to be empowered through all the required information....A health worker may only provide the information but the decision making remains with the affected mother...”

Shumona Sharmin:

“...we have three media: print, electronic and inter-personal.... Since long we are publishing different writings in the newspaper. For those who cannot read, we are trying to teach them by carton, festoons etc... In the remote areas we are creating awareness through film shows, different kind of folk programs in local language etc.... In fact, we are trying combine entertainment with awareness. So that, this issue becomes easy for people.

Shahanaz:

“ ...AIDS is more a menace for the commercial sex workers. In my opinion, the exploitation of women has been going on for generations. We need to put an end to it, which we couldn't... In the sex trade for example it is the customer's choice. We can inform them but not force them.... Moreover, the supply of condoms is often not adequate...”

Dr Simin Mahmood:

“In Uganda, they did not wait for the government. They started creating awareness by organizing themselves into self-reliant community and organizations. They not only made sure of the health services but also made people talk, which we still have as a problem in our country.... We must learn this. I think it should be identified as a public crisis first and then start working on it. It is definitely a livelihood and poverty issue....”

Rokeya Afzal Rahman:

“We thought AIDS would not spread in Asia. But it is found that India is the second largest AIDS affected country.... Sex workers are at a high risk, but I am concerned more about general people.... First, we have to identify our area, and then identify the possible affected people. Then we have to work directly. There is no alternative to awareness, which is why we have to publish something regularly at least every week in the newspaper, and discuss within big or small range/group, invite different speakers, sometimes bring affected people, even discuss with risky population directly, especially not sex workers but affected from some other way, talk with these people and publish that. I think this will a big task”

Salma Ali:

“ We have a very good law on women's privacy which contains some nice discussions as well. So we think if there is law on AIDS than there would be some more progress on areas like receiving blood, donating blood, sexual relation etc. In order to save our own country, we shall have to work in whole of South Asia. What I think is that, our policy-makers should think about this first..... Together we have to create pressure. Before elections, they have to make commitments that what they will do for women after getting into power.... Our responsibility is to create pressure for fulfill of their commitment, establish accountability...Every December we arrange meeting, we talk – but we need to prevent it for which the Government, non-governmental organizations, civil society should work together and aspire to get a good result. That is our main objective

Salina Khalek:

“We say that we are very religious. On one hand, this is true. But on the other hand, we cannot say strongly that there is no perversion in our country or we do not go to brothels. ... We provide little assistance to women by linking them up with different organizations. Mohila Samity has separate health department, where we are always working on women’s health... We are working to raise awareness against cancer, especially breast cancer. Now we include AIDS. With this we are trying to cooperate with different organizations who are directly working with AIDS”.

Dr. Zahidur Rahman.

“ In fact, last year’s slogan was ‘Women consciousness and HIV AIDS’. It is an ongoing process. This year slogan is “Stop AIDS, keep the promise”. We organized this meeting to see how much we achieved from our last year’s work and what new we can do... A lot of innocent women and children are affected. They are neither responsible for it or nor do they know anything about it. ... Each of us has to work from our own position. I am not in the parliament that is why it won’t work- with this reason one cannot avoid it. I will welcome all to bring a change the present situation of our country please start working from wherever you are.”

Mohammad Ali Bhuiyan:

“Truth is that AIDS is risky for women and which is part of all the obstacles that come from family, society and state. The main problem of our work is that, women do not know about health awareness, empowerment, employment, education or she does not know whether she has the right in family, society or at national level.... Although we have made some achievements in this area. ... I saw in my working area that if we cannot transform awareness into action or direct implementation then this is useless. If you observe in your work, you will see lot of problems like, how much we can apply, how much condom user increased, how many people know about it, how many service centers and HIV test center exist etc.... If all of us here can carry this in our heart and bring this issue in every discussion in family, workplace, public, private everywhere. I think it is a big job done... AIDS program is running in Bangladesh for last 10 year. But what kind of work is going in national level and what is the result? We have to see whether there is enough budget, human resource, and information and whether we have the ability to make research reports. Through media we can personally do advocacy at policy level.”

Parveen Rashid:

“...Women who are affected do not have any particular identity. They come from any layer of society rich, very poor, middle class, middle aged, adolescents, old everybody. You can not border them within religion, race or group.... In fact, women are affected because they are women. Our society is not thinking or discussing about their risk. Since it is a women issue, it is neglected and not taken up seriously”.

Dilruba Begum

“When it comes about our duty, I think men especially youth has to do a lot in this issue. We can save ourselves if we can work with all of them... In fact there is no alternating than awareness raising”.

Dr. Layla Anjuman Banu

“The changes that were supposed to come in our society did not come that widely. You can say it is our inability due to which we could not take things forward the way it should have been.... The way doctors and hospital staff deal with patients here, as a doctor I am taking the blame ... Nurses, doctors who are doing blood transfusion, giving injection etc also run the risk of being affected if the patient is positive ... It is obviously right that we have to do the needlework very carefully in order to overcome this panic and negligence....”

Wahida Banu:

“...women those who are in power are in fact, influenced by men of the patriarchal society as their decision makers which we do not think deeply. In direction and management, men are also leading than women. With a small numbers of women NGO leaders coming out, they are being exploited. There is common believe in our society that those women who does not have anything else to do, who are little clever, they work in NGOs. Especially NGOs filed workers working with target group like sex workers, unisex and MSM. One cannot even think how the field workers are being humiliated... Again in decision-making, women are in inferior position and think that if men of her family have cast their vote than why does she need to go?
.... There is duplication of work but no effective coordination. For this, I feel there should be a monitoring sector. Who is doing what and where and to what effect- all these need to be known”.

Dr. Najmus Sahar Sadiq

“AIDS is such a disease for which a lot of social reasons are responsible. Inequality between men-women is responsible for creating AIDS. Putting an end to the discriminatory practices will also help to prevent AIDS.... In fact, women are oppressed by the circumstances that put her into subjugation. Men are dominating in every family. We have to decide whether we face this together or keep doing whatever we want to do on an individual basis...”

Shireen Akhter

“Women don’t have the power to take decision. Perception of women is such that anything done by women is considered bad. Or without permission women cannot do anything. She becomes guilty if she protests against injustice this attitude is the main problem. We have to overcome it and with this lack of awareness and education in women. But I also want to ask: do men have education? I will welcome Prothom Alo to organize another meeting on Men and AIDS and their duty. Which in my opinion is more important. If we cannot change our mentality, this disease, which is spreading through blood and sexual relation, cannot be stopped. With the change in current mentality which determines morality and awareness, I think we will be able to play an important role in preventing AIDS”

Participants list

1. Rokeya Afzal Rahman, Advisor of former Caretaker Government.
2. Dr. Najmus Sahar Sadiq, Associate Residence Representative, UNDP.
3. Parveen Rashid, Managing Director, SMC.
4. Salina Khalek, President, Bangladesh Mohila Samity.
5. Dr. Simin Mahmood, Sociologist, Researcher, BIDS.
6. Advocate Salma Ali, Executive Director, Bangladesh National Lowers Association.
7. Dr. Tasnim Azim, Program Head, HIV Program, ICDDR,B.
8. Sara Zaker, Drama Personality.
9. Dilruba Begum, Deputy Head, Ministry Information.
10. Dr. Shirin Haque, Professor, English Department, Jahangirnagar University, Member, Innerwheel.
11. Shirin Akhter, President, Working women.
12. Wahida Banu, Chairperson, STI/AIDS Network of Bangladesh.
13. Shahin Sultana, Coordinator, Bangladesh Breastfeeding Foundation.
14. Moushumi, Film Actress.
15. Dr. Layla Arjumand Banu, Environment and Health Secretary, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad.
16. Mukti, Executive Director, Mukto Akash Bangladesh.
17. Shahanaz, President, Durjoy Nari Shongothon.
18. Mohammad Ali Bhuyian, APLF Coordinator, South Asia.
19. Dr. A Z M Zahidur Rahman, Advisor, UNAIDS.
20. Motiur Rahman, Editor, Prothom Alo.