

## Bangladesh: Country Report by Joly Talukder

Comrades and Friends,

First of all, on behalf of the struggling women of Bangladesh I would like to thank all delegates of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Women's Conference. I am grateful to the people of Nepal for receiving us not just in their country but also in their hearts. I would like to tell you about our experience in Bangladesh, particularly about the female workers of the garment industry and other sectors who are in the forefront of the working class movement in our country.

Bangladeshi people are struggling for democracy and social justice. A highly repressive and autocratic govt. is now ruling the country. Through the last 5<sup>th</sup> January 2014 election which was not an election at all and where in more than 50% seats ruling Awami League were declared elected uncontested, the present govt. came to power. Even in other areas there was hardly any voter in the polling centre. The election was boycotted by all parties, except the allies of Awami League which includes the party of the former military dictator.

Since then there is no democracy in our country. All the subsequent local elections were also highly rigged. Therefore a govt. without any support from the people, is ruling the country only with the help of police and other law enforcing agencies. Extra judicial killings, kidnapping and disappearance are common features. It is also crystal clear that the present govt. is fully backed by Indian govt. and Indian ruling class. That is the only strength of the present govt.

On the other hand, the main bourgeois opposition party BNP who had been in power before (three times) has made an alliance with the most reactionary Muslim fundamentalist force, Jamat-I-Islam, whose leaders are now facing trial for the crimes committed by them (such as murders, rape etc) during the war of our independence (1971). And most of them have already been hanged. BNP also supported a fundamentalist

organization namely Hefajat-I-Islam who are openly against women's freedom. This organization is opposed to women's education beyond class four and also against women working in the factory or office. It is surprising that Khaleda Zia, the chairperson of BNP, herself being a woman can support such organization for sheer political interest.

On the other hand, clandestine religious fundamentalist terrorist groups are active in Bangladesh, who have already killed several progressive and the secular writers (even science book writers) and publishers on the pretext that they are anti-islam. Islamic fascist fundamentalists so far killed Hindu and Christian priests, Hindu worshipers and also Shiah Muslims. Govt. has utterly failed to protect citizens from the brutal attacks of the fundamentalists.

There are many fold oppressions and exploitations on women. They are oppressed and exploited in their family life. It is so common in a patriarchal society like ours. Again they are extremely exploited in the factories. And on the top of it they are to fight against the autocratic rule of the state for democratic rights side by side with the male members of the society.

Comrades,

It is known to all of us that under capitalism women are doubly exploited everywhere in the world. Moreover, due to extreme poverty, predominance of the feudal culture, religious conservatism, patriarchy and brutal attack by the Islamic fanatic women are most severely oppressed in Bangladesh. The society in Bangladesh is highly male dominated; laws are also male-biased. Women are often physically tortured by husbands, which sometime leads them to death. In workplace women are paid less and always occupy inferior positions. Women in Bangladesh have to face various kinds of harassment including sexual abuse. Child rape has increased.

Apart from these scenarios there is however other side of the picture. There is growing resistance against the oppressive social system and the struggle for women's liberation is developing. In the present decade there have been several uprisings of the garment workers in which female workers played very important and militant role. It is the female

members of the working class who are playing the most important role as regards women liberation, much more than the educated women of the upper strata of the society.

Under the leadership of GWTUC we have successfully led several movements in the garment sector. The movement for the minimum wages, Tuba and Swan garment worker's movement, Tazreen and Rana plaza worker's movement etc. can be particularly mentioned. During these activities we had to face bullet, arrest, physical torture and a lot of false cases. But that could not stop our movement. The wages are still too low, lowest in the entire world so far the garment industry is concerned. We are trying to form the unity and consensus among the workers in order to initiate an effective movement for better wages. Garment Workers' Trade union Centre (GWTUC) has started a movement demanding 15000 taka (equivalent to 187 USD per month) for minimum wages of the garment workers.

Friends,

At this moment when we have gathered at Kathmandu, there are some ongoing movements which we are leading in Bangladesh. The struggle for protecting the 511.83 acres agricultural land by the women tea workers should be particularly mentioned. The female tea workers are not only showing their courage and militancy in the fight against attacking police and hired muscle men, but also demonstrating brilliant organizing capability. This land is situated at Chandpur of Chunarughat sub district in Habigonj district. In Bangladesh tea industry is an important export based industry employing hundred thousand workers most of them being women. About 200 years ago they came from south India. They are most poorly paid, forced to work very hard. They do not have any trade union right. They get salary only 85 taka (that is 1 dollar) per day. Nobody can survive with such a low wage. Therefore the workers depend on this land for their survival which they have been cultivating for one hundred and fifty years. Recently govt. announced that they would set up a special economic zone in that land depriving the tea workers of their traditional rights. And that is in the name of so called development. According to the decision of the govt. of

Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA) went to acquire the land. Due to resistance of the 16000 workers they failed to acquire it. Workers boldly declared that they can sacrifice their life but they cannot give up their land.

The present government has become ruthless and reckless enough by planning to establish a coal-based power plant with the assistance of India in Rampal near Sundarban, which is world's largest mangrove forest, home land of Royal Bengal Tiger and also an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The proposed power plant will certainly harm the ecosystem of the area which will eventually lead to the destruction of the Sundarban causing great distress and immeasurable loss to the local farmers and fisherman, dependent on Sundarban.

This coal-fired power plant was rejected by India in their own land because of environmental question. It is known to everybody that Sundharban always protects us like mother from any catastrophe like Sidor and Aila. The power plant will cause disaster and the Sundarban will be demolished. Our movement is going on to stop the coal-fired power plant in Sundarban area. Now we are going to organize a long march from Dhaka to Sundharban on 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> March where more than 4 to 5 thousand people will participate including a large number of women.

Dear comrades, apart from the class struggle waged by the female workers which contributes to the development of the struggle for women's liberation, there are formal women organizations and women movements too. Women cell of the Communist Party of Bangladesh organized a big demonstration to raise voice for women's liberation and to popularize specific women's demands on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2016. There are also petty bourgeois feminist movements, mostly by the foreign funded NGOs. Some foreign fund backed NGOs are performing their business and thus diluting the agenda of the movement. In spite of all these limitations, we are trying to build up a revolutionary women's liberation movement.

Dear delegates,

Without women's liberation there cannot be any revolutionary change in the society. Under the capitalist and imperialist system women are more oppressed and exploited in various ways. Women are simultaneously fighting against imperialism and patriarchy. For this reason the struggle of the women is getting harder than before. The present world capitalist and imperialist system which has been proved to be rotten, irrational and oppressive is to be replaced by a truly democratic, humane and free society that is socialism. To achieve this national and international goal, women's movement for liberation is very important. To quote Karl Marx, '...great social changes are impossible without feminist ferment'. Marx also said 'Social progress can be precisely measured by the social position of the fair sex'.

Thank you for patient hearing.