

Brief Report of Seminar on 'Housing and Land Rights: Accessibility and Realities of Dalits in Bangladesh'

20 October 2014: CIRDAP Auditorium Dhaka

The constitution of Bangladesh has secured equal rights, status and opportunities towards all its citizens. However, around 6.5 million of Dalits are deprived of all these constitutional commitments. Most of the Dalits are landless and homeless, untouched by the so-called upper class. Their shabby and dilapidated housing generate a picture of different world detached from the mainstream society. The Dalit community is bound to reside for years at the colony built in the underdeveloped government's khash land in the villages and towns.

Under these circumstances Nagorik Uddyog and Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) jointly organized a seminar on 'Housing and Land Rights: Accessibility and Realities of Dalits in Bangladesh' at CIRDAP Auditorium on 20 October, 2014. The overall objective of the seminar was to share the housing and land rights situation of the Dalit community and find out way forward for improvement. A total of 119 participants from Civil Society Organizations, Human Rights Organization, Dalit community people, including guests attended the seminar.

Ms. Nur Jahan Begum MP, member, Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Housing and Public Works, was present as the chief guest in the seminar. Special guests and discussants in the seminar were eminent researcher and Dalit rights activist Professor Mesbah Kamal, Department of History, University of Dhaka; Mr. Shamsul Huda, Executive Director, Association of Land Reforms and Development (ALRD), Mr. John A. Armstrong, National Director, Habitat for Humanity Bangladesh; Mr. Rabindranath



Soren, President, Jatiyo Adibasi Parishad (National Council for Indigenous People); Moni Rani Das, President, Dalit Women Forum and Mukul Shikder, Advisor, BDERM. The seminar was chaired by Mr. Sunil Kumar Mridha, President, BDERM and moderated by Mr. Zakir Hossain, Chief Executive of Nagorik Uddyog. A keynote paper was presented by Mr. Istiaque Mahmud, Research & Documentation Officer, Nagorik Uddyog.

Mr. John A. Armstrong, National Director of Habitat for humanity said that the Dalit need special facilities in Bangladesh as their housing situation is extremely vulnerable. He said that leaving this huge population underdeveloped, the target for sustainable development could not be achieved. He also mentioned that Habitat for Humanity is working for the *Rishi* community. He expressed interest to work in collaboration with BDERM and Nagorik Uddyog for the development of housing situation of Dalit community in future.

Professor Mesbah Kamal said that the housing and land opportunities allotted to the Dalit communities is insufficient and other privileges like water, sanitation was so inadequate that can be termed as beyond of the humanity. He demanded immediate action by the government to ensure dignified housing facilities for them. He also demanded to give priority to the Dalit community in the project of housing for the middle class and poor in the rural areas as committed by the Prime Minister.

Mr. Shamsul Huda, Executive Director of Association for Land Reforms and Development (ALRD) said that government should allot *khas* land to the Dalit community on priority basis. He wished that non-government organizations would come forward to support Dalit community in land development or decent housing.

Zakir Hossain, Chief Executive of Nagorik Uddyog said that movement for the rights of the Dalit had gained momentum in recent years and government had taken various initiatives for their development. But the Dalits will have to fight until they get the same privilege like the mainstream society as per the constitutional rights.

President of Dalit Women Forum, **Ms. Moni Rani Das** said 'this is the time to be united and raise collective voice for housing and land rights of Dalits.' She gave emphasis on political participation of Dalits and identified this as one of the main weapon against any discrimination.

The chief guest, **Ms. Nurjahan Begum MP**, mentioned that the present government had taken a lot initiative for the development of the Dalit community. She highlighted that, in fiscal year 2014-15 the government allocated BDT 50 crore for the housing of Dalits. However, she agreed that the community needs lot of supports in terms of housing and land rights and being a member, she would raise the issue in the meeting of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Housing and Public Works. She assured that during the tenure of the present government the housing and land rights of the Dalit would be ensured within the capacity of the government.

The major recommendations made in the seminar

- Conduct physical survey on the housing and land situation of the Dalit community and take practical and special steps including adequate budget allotment for removing housing problem of the Dalit.
- Ensure permanent housing of the Dalit community; allot existing land to the Dalit community where they have been living for generation. Stop eviction by the land grabber, influential people, bring them under law and ensure exemplary punishment.
- Proper monitoring by the govt. to ensure that the allocated budget for housing of Dalits is being used properly.
- Ensure adequate rooms for the families in the Dalit colonies, construction of new buildings, deliver in time, maintain quality, ensure hygienic toilet and drainage system.
- Conduct massive awareness campaign to change the mindset of the mainstream people towards the Dalit, ensure acceptance of them in the mainstream society (in terms of buying land, renting house etc.)

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