

Despite all the political turmoil in Bangladesh, with winds of elections in the air, in December 2006, the National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled (NFOWD) was ever optimistically expecting that citizens with disabilities, especially those with visual & physical disabilities, would cast their votes in the upcoming National Parliamentary Elections without facing any barriers.

As unrealistic as this may have sounded then, NFOWD had reasons for being so optimistic.

A campaign had been launched since March 2006 through an open letter in major National Dailies, to ensure that all mainstream political parties include disability issues into their political and election agenda. The theme for the National Disability day on 5<sup>th</sup> April had also been set in the same tune. By early December, while some political parties were still undecided about their participation in the elections itself, this agenda had been ensured.

Sight Savers International (SSI), an esteemed member organization of NFOWD had collected information on the barriers that voters with visual disabilities had faced in the previous elections. Based on the findings of this study and with Article # 17 of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1972 in its favor, in early December NFOWD wrote a detailed letter to the National Election Commission and the Ministry of Social Welfare, pointing out the major problems faced by voters with visual & physical disabilities, seeking positive proactive measures. Upon receipt of this letter from NFOWD, on 18 December 2006, the Ministry of Social Welfare sent a letter to the Secretary, National Election Commission. In the letter, the Ministry forwarded all the demands of NFOWD. NFOWD also arranged a 'Meet the Press' at Dhaka Reporters Unity on 28 December with all the demands.

But then, the political situation turned from bad to worse. A new Caretaker Government had to be sworn in, and all political activities came to a halt. The Election Commission also had to be overhauled. The path that we had progressed so far, seemed to have come to an abrupt halt! Indeed the enthusiasm took a jolt, but the optimism never died even a shade. NFOWD patiently began to play a waiting strategy, ready to pounce on its first opportunity.

This opportunity came in mid April 2007, when NFOWD received information that Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, the Honorable Chief Advisor to the Caretaker Government had given NFOWD leaders an appointment on 25 April. A carefully chosen and comprehensive seven-point charter had been prepared & a memorandum had been presented to the Honorable Chief Advisor by the twelve-member delegation from NFOWD. Ms Geeteera Safiya Chowdhury, the Honorable Advisor of the Ministry of Social Welfare, arranged & was present in the meeting. The Honorable Chief Advisor gave a patient hearing, and agreed to take his personal initiative towards implementation of all the seven highly justified demands. The progress that has happened since that historic meeting, and the pace that the Government of Bangladesh is moving in for mainstreaming disability issues in all sectors of development, is extremely inspiring.

Following our meeting with the Honorable Chief Advisor, the Government of Bangladesh already has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 9 May 2007 and has initiated a process to ratify the instrument. The halted process to amend & update the Disability Welfare Act 2001 has again been put into motion. Rules are being drafted under the Legislation. The National Action Plan on Disability is being elaborated to accommodate plans for 33 different

Ministries from the 17 that it had been prepared for initially. For the first time in the history of the Nation, a meeting had been convened at the Office of the Chief Advisor with senior level representatives of the 33 Ministries on 7 May 2007. They have been given the task to find out measures that could be taken by the respective Ministries for the development of persons with disabilities within their own budgets. The Office of the Chief Advisor, as a regular practice, will review these periodically. A process has also been initiated for restructuring, empowerment and reactivation of the beleaguered National Foundation for Development of the Disabled Persons.

The fifth agenda on the NFOWD memorandum to the Honorable Chief Advisor was inclusion of disability related information in the National Voter Identity Cards.

Four days after this historic meeting, another 12-member delegation of NFOWD met with the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and the two Election Commissioners at the Bangladesh National Election Commission. Anticipating that the delegation might have a wheelchair user person, they relocated the meeting from the inaccessible second floor to an office of one of the Commissioners on the ground floor. At this meeting NFOWD presented a memorandum with an eight-point charter, which included:

- Including disability related information in the Voter Identification Cards & Voters List
- Ensuring accessibility of the polling centers & booths
- Permitting female attendants for male voters, & vice versa, in the cases where attendants of the same sex could not accompany visually challenged voters.

- Permitting vehicular movement for voters with disabilities on the Election Day
- Reduce the permissible minimum age bar of attendants of visually challenged voters from 21 years (according to the Conduct of Election Rules 1972) to 18 years.
- Ensure secrecy of vote casting by the visually challenged voters, by allowing their attendants to cast the vote on their behalf.
- Permitting persons with disabilities as NFOWD representatives to act as Election Observers
- Seeking technical support from NFOWD during training of Election related personnel

The CEC was appalled that such pertinent issues had not been addressed at all during the previous elections. After thorough discussions he promised to look into all the issues and ensure that they are being duly addressed in the upcoming National Election, whenever it takes place.

Meanwhile, NFOWD had organized a TV talk show aired on Channel-I on 2 June 2007, where Advocate Sultana Kamal, former Advisor to the Caretaker Government, also attended as a special guest participant. Participants discussed in detail about the voting rights of persons with disabilities. ATN also aired programs on 29 May and 9 June 2007, on the same issue.

In the few weeks that have passed since that meeting, the Election Commission has decided to pilot a Voter Identification Card process at Sripur Upazilla under the district of Gazipur. This is being done in joint collaboration with the Bangladesh Army and Tiger IT. NFOWD has been assured that the Election Commission is including disability related information into the voter identification process, based on the disability definition provided in the Disability Welfare Act 2001.

With the success that NFOWD has already seen as a response to its year-long campaign, there is no reason why it should not be optimistic now, in expecting that all citizens with disabilities in the country above the age of 18 years will be enrolled as voters, and that they all will cast their votes in the coming election maintaining secrecy, and without facing any hindrances, whatsoever.

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NFOWD, the national disability think tank, is the apex federating body of NGOs working in the Disability field in Bangladesh. Established in 1991, it is registered as the only National Network of NGOs with the Department of Social Services under the Ministry of Social Welfare and with the NGO Affairs Bureau. Our vision is an inclusive, barrier free and rights based society, where all persons with disabilities are mainstreamed. NFOWD is an executive member on the Boards of the National Foundation for Development of the Disabled Persons and the National Social Welfare Council. It is also a member of the National Coordination Committee and the National Executive Committee on Disability (constituted under the Disability Welfare Act 2001). At the international level, it is a member of the South Asian Network on Community Based Rehabilitation & the Asia Pacific Disability Forum. It currently has 253 member NGOs working in 57 districts across the country.

NFOWD works in three areas: (a) coordination amongst its Member organizations (b) national level sensitization & awareness raising on Disability issues and (c) policy advocacy & influencing work, and its principal working relationship is with the Government of Bangladesh. Over the years, within the country, it has gained the reputation and recognition to work as the best possible interface between the Government & the NGOs in this field. Any Committee, taskforce, working group etc. the Government forms on disability issues, unquestionably NFOWD is a member. This is upheld either by policy, law or an administrative decision. At the Regional level, UN-ESCAP has recognized this linkage as one of the 'best practices' of GO-NGO Collaboration in the Asia-Pacific Region.

## Ensuring Voting Rights of Citizens with Disabilities in Bangladesh

**The Initiatives of  
National Forum of Organizations  
Working with the Disabled  
(NFOWD)**

**A National Disability Think Tank  
Working Towards  
An inclusive, barrier free and rights  
based society, where all persons with  
disabilities are mainstreamed**



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