

## **The Canadian delegation in Canada: a tremendous experience**

**Introduction:** In July 2004, SAP Canada took three Canadian women to the South Asia Regional Forum on Women and Governance: Focus on Local Governance. This was an important program activity under the SAP system's South Asia Regional People and Policy Program (SARPPP), which is funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The delegates were Joan Lougheed, Kokila Jacob and Bauni MacKay. Ms. Lougheed is a City and Regional Councilor, Burlington and Halton, and Chair of the *Task Force on Issues for Canadian Women in Municipal Government*, at the *Federation of Canadian Municipalities* (FCM). Ms. Jacob is a journalist with international experience and a member of the *Equal Voice* Steering Committee. Ms. MacKay is a retired teacher and former Board Member of the Canadian Teacher's Federation, who is presently on the Board of *YWCA Edmonton* and the *One Woman One Vote Committee*. She was an Alberta Liberal Party candidate in the 2001 election. All the three have a keen interest, and a good track record, on the women and governance issue.

Apart from participating in the three-day event in Dhaka, they also met NGOs working on women's empowerment issues, and had a glimpse of the Bangladesh Legislature and its spacious grounds. Here they tell the stories of their memorable visit.

### **“The work of NGOs in Bangladesh appears to be truly amazing”**

Bauni Mackay, *One Woman, One Vote, YWCA Edmonton*

I am very grateful that I was given the opportunity to attend **the South Asia Regional Forum on Women and Local Governance** in Dhaka on July 12-14, 2004.

While I found the forum invigorating and educational, I was especially impressed with the two pre-forum days spent visiting non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

**YWCA:** As a board member of the Edmonton YWCA, I was pleased to visit the Dhaka YWCA as well as the YWCA of Bangladesh headquarters. The hospitality of the directors and staff of both agencies was heartwarming.

Since it was a Friday, classes at the Dhaka YWCA School were not in session, but we visited the school and observed some special art classes and part of a concert put on by the dance and music students. The bakery was closed but we visited the craft shop and the facility where women learn sewing and craft. We didn't see the hostel but that facility is of great benefit to women from rural Bangladesh in particular. The fact that the YWCA ensures that all women have literacy skills when they leave their programs indicates the critical role it plays in the enhancing the social milieu of Dhaka and the surrounding area. Providing a school for 3500 children (for girls after second grade only) and using the profits from the private school to fund a free school, is another invaluable service the Dhaka YWCA provides.

Meeting with Ms. Asrukana Das at the National YWCA and having dinner with her and some of her staff, helped me get a broader picture of the role of the YWCA throughout Bangladesh. The fact that Ms. Das is also the chair of SAP Bangladesh shows how immersed she is in providing

service for the well being of her country.

**USC BANGLADESH:** Visiting USC Bangladesh, which is funded by CIDA through USC Canada, proved to be enlightening. Hearing about the Adolescent Development Program and their work with 150 local NGOs in 56 of 64 districts in Bangladesh to provide basic education to girls in particular but sometimes to special needs children as well was inspirational to say the least. The fact that the program teaches family relationship skills in an attempt to curb domestic violence and torture of women indicates how fundamental the program is.

The Executive Director talked about the focus USC Bangladesh has on water purification, family support, rural electrification and trafficking of women and children. He talked about three and four- year-old children being sold to the Middle East, to become camel jockeys, because their crying makes the camel's race faster. Providing health centres and teaching women their legal rights are two other areas of focus.

Another area the USC is interested in is good governance, particularly at the local level. We were given a brief lecture on the four levels of local government and the need for women to fully participate in at least one of these levels. In a CIDA- funded project, 15 NGOs have banded together to advocate for gender equity in local government. They train women to be candidates, who then train other women, and so on, looking to get larger numbers of women ready to participate in local government. Sometimes this involves teaching literacy, so the development of human resources is also part of the work of USC Bangladesh. The Executive Director indicated that until local government is strengthened, there is no hope for Bangladesh to develop. He personally advocates collecting taxes to provide services, but of course elected people resist the idea because they want to be re-elected.

**SOUTH ASIA PARTNERSHIP-BANGLADESH:** At SAP Bangladesh, we met the staff and had lunch with them and a 28 year-old local woman councilor, who had traveled for three hours by bus, with her husband, to meet with us. She was elected to a reserved seat and therefore was not given much credence by those council members who were not elected to reserved seats. She talked about being dismissed by the men on council as having little to offer and about the difficulty she had obtaining her share of funds to disburse to her constituents. In fact, she didn't get her share of money to travel around her constituency. Ironically, her husband often answered for her when we asked a question. Nevertheless, it was a valuable experience to meet with her and to hear first hand about the challenges elected women face when they attempt to get involved in local governance. It set the stage for viewing the film, *The Little Republic*, produced by the Institute of Social Sciences, India, later in the Forum. [This feature film tells the challenging story of an elected woman councilor in India.]

**THE KHAN FOUNDATION:** Meeting with Ms. Rokhsana Khondker of the Khan Foundation gave us an even clearer picture of how intense the efforts are to help women take their rightful place in the social structure of Bangladesh. While governance is a major focus of the foundation, they also focus on legal networking through the Women Lawyers' Association, founded by Ms. Khondker, who is a lawyer.

Over the last five years, the Foundation has trained 45,000 men and women to be more effective

local councilors with additional training for women. However, they don't support the concept of reserved seats for women because the women elected to these seats do not have the status that the rest of the council members enjoy. Consequently, not much has changed to improve the lives of women. Ms. Khondker talked about the need for government policies and social attitudes to change before this can happen. The foundation advocates on behalf of women and networks with hundreds of NGOs in doing this.

**OBSERVATIONS:** I noticed that *capacity building* is a term used often by the NGOs, indicating that they see a need to empower people by teaching them skills, making them aware of their rights, and helping them achieve those rights through democratic participation and economic independence. Although I have visited other developing countries, I haven't had as great an opportunity to see the absolutely critical value of the work done by NGOs in helping to advance the social, political and economic growth of a country as I did in this visit to Bangladesh. The work of NGOs in Bangladesh appears to be truly amazing. Apparently there are at least 1200 fairly large NGOs operating but when the small-localized NGOs are counted in, there are over 5000. The people we met with talked about the need for more global strategy building and it became clear to me how necessary it is for CIDA to expand its role in helping NGOs do their work in Bangladesh.

**THE REGIONAL FORUM:** The Forum brought together women and a few men from NGOs, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Research Institutions, and local and provincial governments. The discussions were sophisticated, focused, often passionate, and always sincere. The desire of participants to formulate concrete, pragmatic recommendations that would result in definite action after the Forum was clear from the beginning.

The opening session was formal and dignified, featuring presentations by the Senior Management and Board Members of the various SAP organizations, including SAP International, as well as the Prime Minister's Principal Secretary, Dr. Kamaluddin Siddiqui, and the Executive Director of the Institute of Social Sciences of India, Dr. George Matthew. All talked about the plight of South Asian women and the need to strengthen democracy and change government priorities, not only by electing more women to local government but also by giving them the authority to act. They also suggested that countries could not develop unless this happens and that NGOs and CSOs have a large role in making it happen.

During the forum various speakers outlined some of the deterrents to women's participation in local government. These included social and cultural norms; inferior economic status; the nature of politics and the political environment; corruption; low literacy rates; difficulty obtaining nomination; lack of mobility; lack of encouragement from women already in office; violence, slander, and character assassination; and lack of information, political awareness, and training.

As Ms Joan Lougheed from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities pointed out, the participation of Canadian women in all levels of government is only 21.7%, and we rank only 37 out of 181 countries in degree of participation of women in government. Many of the systemic barriers listed above exist in Canada.

All speakers talked about the need for women to have a role in political decisions making if they

are going to have economic power. One needs only to look at Canadian corporate boardrooms to see the same principle illustrated in Canada.

There seemed to be a general consensus among Forum speakers that part of the solution is to have a quota system. India's system of reserving one-third of the local seats for women seems to be the most successful. Bangladesh, whose Prime Minister and Main Opposition Leader are women, has recently ended its quota system, and the participation of women has gone down dramatically. Sri Lanka, in spite of having the highest literacy levels in South Asia, having had the first woman Prime Minister in the world, and now having another woman Prime Minister, and being more developed than the other South Asian countries, does not have a quota system and has the lowest participation rate for women. Pakistan and Nepal have quota systems (a limited one in the case of Nepal) and participation rates for women are improving.

Some speakers pointed out that simply having participation by women is not enough. The quality of participation is important in terms of how much they are allowed to participate and the competence of the elected women. The quality of governance is a fundamental issue in the whole discussion.

When we broke into our working groups, I joined the *Capacity Building and Strategies for Training group*. The discussion centered on the transformation of the political culture, strengthening the civil society, and the reformation of government institutions, including legal reform. The need for gender-based political education, management of information and knowledge, and networking and alliance building were seen to be fundamental to making these changes. Including men in these activities is essential if real change is going to happen. Gender sensitization of both men and women is fundamental to breaking down some of the systemic barriers. There was consensus that only through collective action can progress be made. The question about how to achieve this remains, though it was addressed to some extent at the Forum.

After the reports to the plenary session and the determination of priority areas for developing a plan of action, I joined the group looking at *how to improve the quality of participation of women in local government*. We looked at gender-inclusive education and decided on a train-the-trainer model to create cadres of trainers to enhance the skills and techniques of elected members, potential candidates, functionaries, and college union leaders would be the best approach. To facilitate information and knowledge management we outlined a plan for the research, collection, compilation, development and dissemination of data and materials. To enhance alliance and network management, we outlined a plan for the formation of new fora as well as the strengthening of existing ones, in addition to building channels for information exchange among network members and initiating joint actions with a variety of groups, including local governments.

In the wrap-up session it was evident that a lot of work had been generated by the three working groups, resulting in some concrete recommendations for specific actions. I look forward to receiving a transcript of the work done by the three groups and an indication of what next steps are being taken to implement the recommendations that came out of the Forum.

The Forum provided an opportunity to contribute to valuable on-going work with long-term benefit to the member countries in general, and to women in particular. It was humbling to be among such dedicated, knowledgeable people, to make connections and exchange personal contact information with some, to receive books authored by a few, and to realize that their efforts exceed anything we are doing in Canada to increase the participation of women in government at any level.

As a result of this visit to Bangladesh, the planet became much smaller for me and my global sisterhood became much larger.

Thank you for both.

**“I have a deep respect for the people and their achievements”** – Kokila Jabob, *Journalist, Steering Committee Member, Equal Voice*

Without a doubt my journey to Bangladesh to participate in the SAP organized forum on women and governance was inspiring to say the least. It helped lift the veil of preconceptions, biases and ignorance. Through my interaction with the forum participants as well as other NGOs, CSOs and ordinary people in Dhaka I returned with a better understanding and awareness of the challenges they face and I have a deep respect for the people and their achievements.

**THE EXPOSURE VISIT:** Our first insight into Bangladesh’s development programs for women was obtained at our meeting with the USC Bangladesh director. He briefed us about its programs such as the rural Adolescent Development Program (funded by CIDA) and delivered by 150 NGOs. He also gave us an overview of the local four-tier government structure – village-union-upazila-district – and explained that the focus of their programs is at the union level. They are aiming at empowering women at that level through introduction of micro-credit programs etc. Their goal is also to develop a women’s self-help group which will connect and network with legal aid organizations to strengthen their cause.

This was followed by our visit to SAP BD offices where we met with an elected woman village official – Bilqees Begum. It was very insightful. The lady is young, enthusiastic and could be a good role model for other women. She was a health NGO (midwife) and well known in the village and therefore well accepted as a union elected official. She noted however that the male colleagues are not helpful, they monopolize the meetings and women are kept inactive. They try to sideline her at the meetings with a dismissive ‘what do women know’ attitude. She is trying to assert herself as she is convinced that women can make a difference on many issues, especially those that affect women’s well being.

There were signs that her husband is also equally involved and could wield power by proxy, but I also got a sense that with experience she will assert herself. Moreover, taking the cultural environment into consideration his support could help make her more acceptable initially. Such interference by husbands of the elected women officials is seen as a stumbling block to women’s independence in governance. I found this issue being raised at the forum by delegates of every participating country who said it detracted from the credibility of women politicians, i.e., men

continued to hold the reins of power and decision-making.

Advocate Rokhsana Khondker of the Khan Foundation (NGO working on gender and local governance) cited this reason for her outright rejection of reservation quotas for women candidates when we met her. Bangladesh's affirmative action in reserving quotas for women at the local governance levels has not led to women emerging as credible politicians, nor has it led to decisions aimed at improving women's lot, she said. She prefers working towards enabling women to get elected on their own right in general seats. The Indian experience outlined at the Forum and discussed later in this report (India was the first to legislate and reserve 33 per cent seats for women at the lower three tiers of local government) is significant, specially in deciding which path to take and why. This is relevant in the Canadian context too as it adds to the debate being encouraged by Equal Voice. The Khan Foundation has been working for more than 15 years on strengthening the local government by ongoing training programs – both men and women, with additional training for women. Over the years they have trained 45,000 men and women on local governance.

Ms Khondker is a leading women's activist in Bangladesh whose work on human rights and in empowering women in her country has been significant. She chairs the Child Domestic Workers group and is the founding member of the Women Lawyers Association and the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association. She was instrumental in organizing the first International Parliamentarians Meeting in Bangladesh in 1993. I believe Equal Voice can have a meaningful linkage with her and will recommend that Equal Voice establish an ongoing communication with her.

On the second day a strike/ 'hartal' called by the opposition political party shut down the city of Dhaka. We were confined within the hotel walls but felt the pulse of ordinary Bangladeshis - their hopes, fears and political awareness - by talking to hotel staff.

**THE INAUGURATION OF THE FORUM AT THE DHAKA SHERATON:** Headliners of the opening session were Dr Kamaluddin Siddiqui, Prime Minister's Principal Secretary, and Dr George Mathew, Executive Director of the Institute of Social Science (ISS) of India. SAP-Bangladesh Chairperson Asrukana Das presided over the opening session. SAP officials who spoke at the session were Rohit Kumar Nepali, SAP-International Interim Executive Director, Syed Nurul Alam, SAP-Bangladesh Executive Director, and Richard Harmston, SAP-Canada Executive Director.

Dr Siddiqui outlined some government initiatives on women's participation in local government bodies. He emphasized the need for a strong and sustained advocacy in favour of democratic local governance. He also urged the delegates at the Forum to critically look at some of the key governance issues of local governance in South Asia, such as excessive centralized power and authority and the slow decentralization of decision-making.

The opening session was followed by two plenary sessions. The panelists of the first session "Gender and Governance: The big picture" were SAP-I Programme Manager Dr Madan Pariyar, who made a presentation on "Women's Representation in Local Government: A case for affirmative action," Dr George Mathew on "Women in Governance: The South Asian

Experience" and Ms Joan Lougheed, Chairperson of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Gender Committee, who delivered a presentation on "A Canadian Perspective on Women and Local Government." Rohit Kumar Nepali moderated the first plenary session.

In the second plenary session on "Emerging Role of Women in Decision-Making: An analysis of country specific situations," we heard reports from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The dinner held at the conclusion of the first day of the forum featured a special guest speaker. Chitrlekha Yadav, Deputy Speaker, Lower House of Representatives of Nepal. Yadav urged the women of the region to discard their traditional submissiveness and be more assertive. She echoed the Canadian perspective that proportionate representation of women should start within the political parties as a first step towards women's political empowerment. She asserted that political leaders have to play a proactive role, particularly those at the policy and decision-making level in order to advance this cause.

**DAY 2 OF THE FORUM:** Panel discussions: The participants signed up for the following three groups: Capacity Building, Innovative Interventions, Advocacy.

I participated in the Advocacy panel where my presentation focused on the strategies used by Equal Voice to seek proportional representation for women at all three levels of government – municipal, provincial and federal. Other speakers were Dr. Pamela Singla, Professor at Delhi University, India, and Sheila Ebert, Agromart Foundation, Sri Lanka. There were additional speakers on request from Nepal and Pakistan. The discussions on advocacy efforts and what should each country derive from the other participants which would be relevant in their countries, made for some lively debate. Dr. Vijaylakshmi Brara of India moderated the panel discussions and the reporter was Rubina Feroze Bhatti of Tangh Wasaib Tanzeem, Pakistan.

The participants were interested in learning more about how Equal Voice managed to carry on with its activities with zero funding, as well as the effectiveness of its actions. There was consensus on the need for NGOs and women's advocacy groups to form a regional network to support and learn from each other's advocacy initiatives similar to Equal Voice's linkage with 44 women's associations in Canada. There was an agreement that internet would assist in this effort, but there was also a recognition of the practical difficulties of doing this – lack of access to internet by many participants who come from remote areas specially North West Frontier area of Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

**DAY 3: CONCLUSION:** After much debate the three panels came up with their recommendations. Three common regional issues were identified for urgent attention:

1. Improving the quality of participation of women in local government
2. Advocacy for reservation of seats for women at all levels of government
3. Combating violence against women in politics.

**Observations:**

While the Canadian experience was of interest and provided some guidance, I felt there was much I gained from the initiatives undertaken by the NGOs and CSOs in South Asia. Women face similar challenges and obstacles, but South Asian women are further burdened by cultural restrictions, poverty and lack of access to education and facilities for their general well being.

The forum reaffirmed that NGOs play a significant role in South Asia in to right the gender balance on issues. There seems no parallel in Canada. India is ahead of Canada in terms of the affirmative action taken in reservation for women politicians. There may be some lessons to be learnt here, though Canadian women would balk at a direct reservation/quota for women, opting instead for proportional representation.

The forum raised the issue of quotas vs. proportional representation vs. no reservation. Some participants were of the opinion that reservation is not effective, women politicians lack credibility, and hence the result is regressive instead of progressive. The observations of the Indian delegates and the Indian experience formed the foundation on which the discussions proceeded. Indian delegates said similar debates took place in India but when faced with the fact that without reservation women had very little chance of getting into politics at all, even the naysayers came round. So today everybody is happy, but realize that it is just the first step. They also recognize that it works well in some parts of the country and not so well in others.

Indians also pointed out that while the reservation increased the number of women in politics, the quality of governance was deficient. Also women did not necessarily fight for policy changes which would benefit women. Several reasons were cited. However again the opinion was that right now Indian women were happy with the numbers of women in local politics and believe that quality will come as more women get into political life and gain experience. They also said that training helps and there are case studies to prove this point.

The training programs for women politicians are of interest to Canada. Equal Voice is planning a campaign school and I would recommend that our members look at the experience of Bangladesh and India in this regard. What is also of interest to Equal Voice would be the support CSOs in South Asia have extended to women and their active role in getting governments in South Asia to take affirmative action.

My report to the Equal Voice (EV) steering committee will focus on making them aware of the affirmative action taken in India and hopefully leading to a discussion within EV to see if lessons can be taken and applied here. My report is to be distributed through the EV listserv to promote an awareness about women and local governance issues in South Asia, affirmative action taken by India and others, and their future plan of action.

I would encourage Equal Voice to establish a line of communications with the South Asian NGO network, Institute of Social Science, and the Khan Foundation, to continue to learn from each other's experience vis-à-vis strategy, gender sensitization training and educational curriculum. I also plan to write about my experience, about SAP initiatives and the current status in South Asia in as many media outlets as possible.