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**INTEGRATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND THE GENDER  
PERSPECTIVE**

**Written statement\* submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC),  
a non-governmental organisation in general consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 January 2005]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **DOWRY-RELATED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN BANGLADESH**

1. Dowry-related violence is a common feature in Bangladesh, affecting the lives of many women. Other than specific acts of violence such as killings, torture, the throwing of acid and the like, dowry demands affect the lives of women socially and culturally in a much deeper manner. Fundamentally, they undermine the equality of women and create culturally accepted forms of discrimination against them. They can affect the life of a girl from the very start. Preference for boys often begins with the parental realisation that the burden of finding dowries falls on them as soon as the child is born. Thus, the devaluation of a child takes place in culturally subtle forms from the very beginning. This continues throughout their early years and up to the time of marriage.

2. On 10 January 2004 the Daily Star newspaper in Bangladesh observed that

"...A woman on fire has made dowry deaths the most vicious of social crimes. It is an evil prevalent in the society and despite efforts by some activists and women's rights organisation to eliminate this menace, the numbers have continued to climb. In villages marriage was once considered a very sanctified bond united in the worst or best of times, in sickness or in health through the vicissitudes of life. But dowry related deaths have shattered that bond of peaceful and happy relationship. A recent survey by the Bangladesh Human Rights Organisation, and Bangladesh Women Lawyers Association revealed that in 2001, there were 12,500 cases of women repression, in 2002 the figure rose to 18,455 and in the year ending in 2003 the figure climbed to 22,450. The grisly act of a brute and greedy husband in Chapai Nawabganj as reported in the newspapers in December 27 last is a story better not be heard. Having failed to realise a dowry claim of Tk. 20,000/= Shamsher killed her wife Marina just on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of their marriage. The most grisly side of the story is that Shamsher hired three other monsters for Tk. 300/= and Marina was slaughtered by Shamsher after she was forced to be gangraped by four human monsters including himself". (Text as received).

3. Dowry-related violence is in part caused by a misplaced get rich quick mentality whereby dowries are seen as the perfect instrument for upward material mobility. Middle and upper class as well as better-educated grooms demand huge dowries. Often, even after the payment of a dowry, the husband or their families may demand more money or goods. The following story from the same media report as cited above is just one out of so many such tales of violence:

4. "Beauty Akhtar of Dhamrai Upazila was married to Muntaj Ahmed of Arpara village in Manikganj about two and a half years ago. Beauty's father met his son-in-law's dowry demand by paying three lakh taka. But Muntaj's greed was insatiable. He started torturing her for more money and at one stage locked her in a room for three days without food. It so happened that on November 12 last, the entire family including husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law and other in-laws beat her with iron rod in a row". (Text as received).

5. The statistics on dowry-related violence against women in Bangladesh give cause for alarm. According to a report on human rights violations in Bangladesh by the human rights organisation Odhikar,

"267 women including one child were victimized due to dowry related matters. Among them, 165 were killed, 77 tortured by acid violence and one was divorced and 11 committed suicide due to incessant dowry demands".

According to Odhikar, these figures were collected from newspaper reports on dowry related violence published throughout 2004.

6. Dowries put women in a helpless position, as they are never part of the discussion regarding payment. Dowries are often a monetary deal between two men: the bride's father and the groom. Such cultural arrangements completely violate the dignity of women and the quality of their personal relationships.

7. There have been some laws enacted to control such violence against women, such as the Acid Control Act and the Dowry Prohibition Act. However, the level of violence, which continues unabated, demonstrates that such laws do not have the capacity to bring this situation to an end. While such laws are passed under pressure from women's groups and international lobbies, the state often fails to put in place implementation mechanisms to enforce such laws. Within the law-enforcement agencies, deep-seated prejudices regarding the giving of dowries and the predominance of male over female is entrenched. The Government of Bangladesh issued appeals to all heads of public and private universities and the education board to wage war against the practice of dowries in the country. However, there does not appear to be a strong social movement to eliminate this practice.

8. In light of this, the Asian Legal Resource Centre urges the Commission to

a. Pressure the Government of Bangladesh to adopt a more proactive approach to the elimination of dowry.

b. Urge civil society organisations and the media in Bangladesh to conduct a vigorous campaign against dowry problems.

c. Request the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women to engage the government on this issue and encourage an international study on the matter.

d. Establish an international database on dowry issues and dowry-related violence that would contribute to having this matter brought to much broader public scrutiny. It would also ensure more effective methods of eliminating this practice, thereby enhancing the dignity, self-respect and self-confidence of women.

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