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■ BENAZIR BHUTTO CRISIS CENTRES

Civil society concerned over expected closure in Punjab

Myra Imran
Islamabad

The participants of a seminar expressed concern over the expected closure of Benazir Bhutto Crisis Centres located in Punjab after devolution of Ministry of Women Development to provinces.

They were speaking at a seminar titled '18th Amendment: Opportunities and Challenges for Provinces and Women' organised by the Aurat Foundation (AF). The seminar was aimed at discussing various aspects of 18th Amendment with members of civil society and media.

National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) Chairperson Anis Haroon presided over the event whereas the main speakers included Jami Chandio, executive director of the Centre for Peace and Civil Society, and Rehana Hashmi, executive director of the Sisters Trust and a consultant to the UN Women.

Expressing his concern, Aurat Foundation Chief Operating Officer Naeem Mirza said that the Punjab government has not shown any interest in taking the charge of 12 Benazir Bhutto Crisis Centres located in Punjab. "If they have any objection with the name, they can always change it according to their wish, but closing the facility that is catering to a large number of violence victims will be highly unfortunate," he

added.

He said that it was the PML-N that actually initiated these centres. "Sindh has accepted the transfer of these centres to the provincial government whereas Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have not given any clear answer in this regard," he said.

In her concluding remarks, Anis Haroon declined the understanding of some sections of population and human right groups that devolution of Ministry of Women Development (MoWD) would destroy the women's cause. "Because of their vested interests, these groups are propagating that provinces are not sensitised enough to effectively take up the women issues," she said while terming such arguments as highly misleading.

She told the participants that most resolutions regarding women's rights have been passed by Sindh and Balochistan Assemblies, which meant that it was the National and Punjab Assemblies that have highest number of conservative minded people.

In the last meeting of National Assembly Standing Committee, Anis said that the Implementation Commission has shared that they have the devolution plan for MoWD, but they are not disclosing it at this stage as they want to avoid undue criticism.

Centre for Peace and Civil Society Executive Director

Jami Chandio, in his presentation, said that under the 18th Amendment, 102 clauses of the Constitution Pakistan have been amended. "The one major significance of 18th Amendment is that it has reversed the centralisation of state institutions, which was done by the British colonisers." He said that the amendment has effectively formulated the provincial autonomy. "A number of ministries, around twenty one, were unnecessarily being kept with the federation while the issues they represent were more of provincial nature." So far, he said that notification of devolution has been issued Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Population, Ministry of Special Initiative, Ministry of Youth Affairs, Ministry of Zakat Usher, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Livestock, and Ministry of Women Development.

Rehana Hashmi, women's rights activist and executive director of the Sisters Trust, expressed disappointment that the government is still nowhere near to decide whether to devolve Ministry of Women Development (MoWD) to provinces, or not to, or what kind of structure to keep at the federal level if at all. She said that the government hasn't still issued the notification for devolution of MoWD, neither it has decided the financial and administrative particulars of any independent commission on women's development.