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## Passage of Anti-Women Practices Bill hailed

By Ayesha Shahid

ISLAMABAD, Nov 17: The recent passage of the landmark pro-women bill is accompanied by its fair share of discussion and controversy. Compromises were involved in getting it passed. However, the symbolic and legal value of the bill cannot be overlooked.

To discuss and celebrate the passing of the bill, Aurat Foundation's Legislative Watch Programme for Women's Empowerment organized a reception ceremony titled 'Passage of the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Bill, 2011, and the Way Forward'.

This is a milestone because several other bills like the Acid Crime Prevention Bill, the Domestic Violence Bill and other similar bills have either simply not been passed by the parliament or if passed could not be implemented and became ineffective. In fact several attendants at the forum characterized the current Senate as having a very anti-women bias.

Dr. Doniya Aziz, Member National Assembly (PML-Q), the Chief Guest at the event explained the history behind the Bill. She explained that the draft version of the pro-woman bill was result of negotiations that were taking place during the formation of the Women Protection Act in 2006. Chaudhry Shujaat presented the draft in assembly in 2006 but it lapsed. It was brought again in 2008 but to no avail.

After this point Dr. Aziz took up the efforts of pushing the bill in the National Assembly. It was sent for amendments and changed multiple times until finally in 2011 it was passed two days ago. Dr. Aziz thanked all those who helped and supported her in these efforts.

She especially thanked those who did not object, "I am thankful to those members who could have objected and caused the draft to be rejected but they didn't," she said,

adding that the role of media and civil society was especially helpful in creating the right pressures to keep those who disliked the bill quiet.

In reply to several objections raised about punishments and untended aspects in the bill, Dr. Aziz highlighted that compromises had to be made to ensure that the draft bill was passed. She said that the bill has immense symbolic value:

"For the first time the state of Pakistan is saying that this (those customs and traditions that have been made crimes in the bill) is wrong – that this is not just a crime against an individual but a crime against the state. It is a big step that the state is breaking the chains of custom and traditions and recognizing them as unfair and wrong." However, the Bill has not reached finality yet since it still has to get through a seemingly antagonistic Senate. In this case, Senator Nilofer Bakhtiyar took the responsibility of passing the draft bill within the next 90 days.

Activist Ms. Tahira Abdullah also addressed the audience and pointed out hurdles in the way visible in the future. She lauded the efforts of those who pushed this bill but pointed out that, "As long as we have tribal, feudal systems, it is the people with these mindsets that will be investigating and prosecuting the very crimes this bill is supposed to protect women against- there is many a step between the cup and the lip yet."

Ms. Rehana Hashmi, Executive Director of Sisters Trust supported Ms. Tahira Abdullah's words and said, "I am surprised how did this bill get passed in a parliament where most members support the very practices this bill forbids? So it is a great achievement." She highlighted some of the problems that the implementation of this bill faces like the lack of female presence in police, judiciary and revenue department.