marched along the embank-

ment in Harinkhola village.

Duludia Union in Paikgacha.

The people's preference was

for subsistence farming, for a

land free from inundation and

salinity, for a community safe

from violence. What they faced

were mastan squads who shot

and killed many including

## Women in Bangladesh Face Insurmountable Odds

70MEN constitute about 48.5 per cent of the total population of Bangladesh, out of which approximately 86 per cent live in the rural areas. A large number of them are illiterate. malnourished and represent one of the most deprived sections of the population. The following statistics paint a grim picture of their situation.

Female life expectancy in Bangladesh is among the lowest in the world. Their nutritional intake has decreased over time and as a consequence, chronic long-term malnutrition is high. Out of the total female population of 55.3 million (1989-90), 22.0 million are in the reproductive age group. In most cases, a woman is married before eighteen years and bears five or six children on an average and only one-fourth of married women use contraceptives.

Compared to the literacy, rate of 30 per cent for men, only 16 per cent women are literate. Only one in three schoolage girls is attending school.

Evidently, statistics are only an indication of the discrimination and inequality which women are subjected to in Bangladesh. Patriarchal sociocultural and legal norms ascribe to women a much lower status compared to men.

Discrimination of a woman starts at birth and continues through different phases in her life. Gender inequality is further accentuated through a woman's unequal access to resources and authority. Thus her economic, social, legal and political status is compromised all the time.

#### **Economic Situation** of Women

The economic sector includes agriculture, industry, trade, employment, environment and natural resources. Statistics about women's labour force participation in these spheres tell us that their participation has increased three folds from 0.9 million in 1961 to 2.7 million in 1984-85. Nearly 43 per cent of women are involved in agriculture, directly or indirectly. 31 per cent in the manufacturing sector and 11 per cent in the services. As for the status which they occupy in their respective work-places, it is significant to note that 70 per cent of women involved in agriculture work as unpaid family labour and women who work as agricultural wage labourers are mostly from landless and small farm households. Wages received by a woman in the agricultural sector amount to only 70 per cent of her male counterpart.

in the manufacturing sector, women constitute 28 per cent of the industrial labour

by Meghna Guhathakurta

force. In this area, they are largely unorganised and their participation in unions is minimal. Female wage is about one-fifth of male wages in the rural non-agricultural sector.

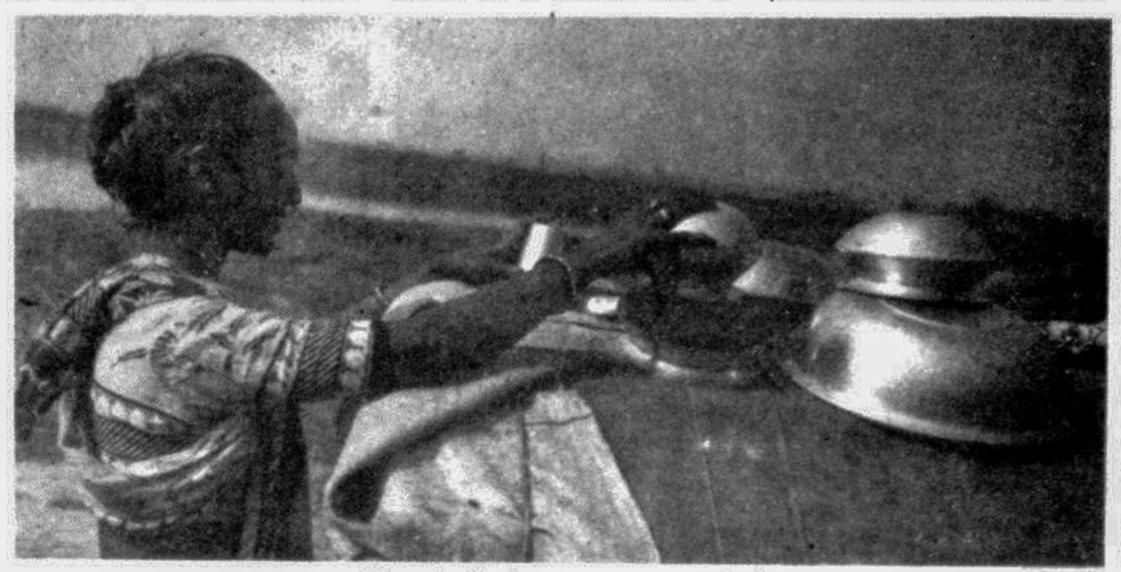
Despite changes in the structure of female employment, the statistics still tend to disguise the actual number of women working because

tus compared to unmarried, childless, widowed or divorced women. Furthermore, the legal structure of Bangladesh society helps to construct the dependent character of women.

The Constitution of Bangladesh gives equal right to men and women - more in theory than in practice. The private life of an individual is

of intermediaries and racke-

In Bangladesh, as in any other country, women are increasingly becoming vocal against gender discrimination and have placed their demands for equal rights However, it is essential that such issues receive national priority, and for this, women's participation in the political process must be ensured and



Household chores go unrecognised

they do not count domestic work which women do in their own households. Work such as cleaning, cooking, fuel gathering, rearing of children, raising poultry and vegetables. tending to animals etc although not quantified in monetary terms are laborious and time-consuming. Besides postharvest agricultural work like husking, storing of rice, seed preservation or stripping jute fibers are directly related to the production process and need to be recognized as such.

#### Social and Legal Situation of Women

the main factors which pre-

Lack of education is one of

vent women from participating in socio-economic activities on an equal footing with men. Female literacy rate is only half of that of men and is gradually widening between the elite and the poorer classes. Only 50% of school-age girls are enrolled in the primary schools compared to 90% of the boys. This discrepancy is directly related to the kind of lifestyle envisaged for a woman living in Bangladesh - early marriage with as many as 10-11 pregnancies out of which an average of three children surviving. In the process, it takes its toll on a woman's health. This is not helped by patriarchal norms which ascribe to women a lower nutritional status than men. Even when she attains motherhood, she is not free of the chains of patriarchy. The mother of a male child has more security in the family and consequent higher social stacircumscribed by personal laws which are based on religious texts corresponding to the respective religious communities in Bangladesh. In many cases, such laws underwrite gender discrimination as in women's unequal right to land. Also in most cases, these laws give men guardianship rights over women, so that from the moment of their birth women always have to be under male protection, be it her father, husband or son. Also some of the most important events in a woman's life marriage, divorce, rights to children and inheritance - are governed by these personal laws. As such criminal offences against women, which may arise from any of the abovementioned situations, such as wife-battering, rape cases or sexual harassment may remain unresolved in courts of law as they tend to fall under the personal jurisdiction of the father, 'husband' or 'son' as

the case might be. One of the poignant indicators and reminders of the subordinate status of women in this society is to be found in the frequent recurrences of sex-related violence, the institutionalization of prostitution and illegal trafficking in women. The common deciding factor behind all these phenomena is economic marginalization and their lack of access to resources, which, in our legal and social system are usually controlled by male members. Once the umbrella of male protection has been taken away, women and their families become vulnerable and falls prey to the machinations

their political status consoli dated. In Bangladesh, women generally do not receive nomi nation in the electoral process in any significant number. That the principle of special represcntation which means that women have reserved scats in National Parliament Uatiyo Sangsad), is tantamount to nomination by the ruling party, thereby changing these seats to potential vote-banks for the government. Despite the fact that Bangladesh has the unique experience of having both the Head of the Government as well as the Leader of the Opposition as women, gender issues discussed above have not entered into the mainstream political

No doubt, a lot of work still

discourse.

remains to be done in creating the right kind of awareness about gender issues and the role of the media, lprint, aural and visual) in this respect cannot be minimized. It is also true to say that women's groups and NGO workers have had some success in mobilising women at the grass-roots level, on gender-related issues. But as the "Women In Development" section of the report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies rightly pointed out, it was time now to build the women's agenda into the mainstream public discourse. In a country boasting so many successful mass movements like the Language Movement, the '69 mass uprising, the '71 Liberation War and the 90 mass upsurge, can this be such a difficult task to achieve?

## Women Take a Leap Forward

The prevalence of domestic violence has been

protested at different levels. But increasingly women

are relating such aggressive assertion of male power

to systemic inequalities, which can be redressed

by Hameeda Hossain

sion among communities.

December 1990 also saw

the rising solidarity of women

the devastating fire in Saraka

Garments caused by a short

circuit, when over 25 workers

were burnt to death and 100

injured because they were

locked inside, women workers

work. In subsequent strikes

off for their labour.

garment workers. Following

F 1857 commemorates the first strike by women textile workers in Chicago, 1990 may be a milestone to mark a change in the content and dynamics of the women's struggle in Bangladesh. Their voices may not sound in unison, but the very diversity speaks of a growth of the women's struggle in Bangladesh. Their message speaks out for economic, political and legal rights. More than that, women are articulating their vision of a social order based on justice and equity. A few glimpses into their protests indicate the di-

rection of their struggle. December 1990 saw the climax of the movement for democracy which challenged the right of the military to dictate the terms of the political order. Women's participation went beyond passive presence in raffes; they actively urged for more political participation, for direct representation and for a genuine democratic restructuring in the state. community and family.

Earlier, since 1987 they had recognised the threat of religious controls by the state and demonstrated against the introduction of the Eighth Amendment. They also boldly challenged the Eighth Amendment in the Courts on the grounds that imposition of Islam as a state religion was counter to the very basis of a democratic society in Bangladesh and created divi-

through a social recognition of legal rights. from many factories all over Karuna Sardar. Her mutilated Dhaka showed their solidarity body bore testimony to the fact against the brutal conditions of that the pursuit of profit and

foreign exchange is not con-

cerned with human suffering. and demonstrations in 1991. thousands of workers from at least 40 garments factories Violence has become a who demonstrated for fair common means for enforcewages, proper contracts, and ment of economic and political power. The prevalence of doan end to harassment, were attacked by police, factory mestic violence has been guards and mastans. Women protested at different levels. workers demand that if the garment industry is to be an But increasingly women are re-

instrument for economic lating such aggressive assergrowth, there must be a trade tion of male power to systemic inequalities, which can be re-In November 1990 a more dressed through a social militant struggle was launched recognition of legal rights. In as a politically influential the interests of gender equity shrimp lord backed by his women have been pressing for the introduction of uniform armed men used force to take personal code, which does over Polder 29 in the Bay of away with discrimination be-Bengal for shrimp culture. In tween communities as well. protest, large numbers of poor, They have demanded ratificaunarmed women and men

tion of UNCEDAW without reservation, as well as other UN convenients which protect human rights.

The women's struggle can no longer be limited to creating opportunities for a select few; the many thousands of poor women who contribute their unpaid labour in agricultural work, in garnients, shrimp processing, realise that their hard labour contributes to the process of unequal development. They have started voicing their demand for a fair exchange for their labour.

Legal rights to ensure equality in family law, to guarantee labour protection, to deter domestic violence, are concerns voiced by women of different communities and reli-

The dynamics of the struggle, although it represents the responses of women, in different situations determined by class, ethnicity and religion, reflects a concern with equity and distributive justice: it seeks a democratisation in relation to the state, the community and the family; it cmphasises a new development.

The quest for equality is impossible if economic, political and cultural processes are controlled by a small section of people. Development must assume a greater equity for and participation by women.

constraints, organisational in-

ability, orthodox religious atti-

### Landmarks in the women's struggle

In 1857, on March 8, in Chicago, women garment workers brought out a procession to protest against unsafe and inhuman factory conditions, low wages and 12-hour working day. Police attacked their peaceful procession. In 1860 women workers in New York demonstrated in support of their demand for the right to unionise.

In 1899 women met in The Hague in Netherlands for a Peace Council.

In 1908 women textile workers in New York demonstrated against long hours of work, unsafe conditions of work, laws against child labour and the right to vote. In 1910 at the Second International held in Copenhagen, Clara Zetkin declared that March 8 be commemorated as International Women's Day.

In 1948 the UN Covenant on Human Rights declared basic human rights without any discrimination on the basis of colour, caste, age or sex.

In 1975 the first International Conference for Women was held in Mexico. 1975 to 1985 was declared by the UN Decade for Women. The Convention for Elimination of all Discrimination against Women introduced in the UN. It was ratified by many states. Bangladesh ratified it with fundamental reservations.

In 1980, a mid decade UN Conference for Women held in Copenhagen.

In 1985, the Third UN Conference for Women held in Nairobi. Over 30,000, a majority from the Third World attended the conference and the Forward Looking Strategies to eliminate discrimination against women and to integrate them into development was adopted.

"A development process that shrinks and poisons the pie available to poor people, and then leaves women scrambling for a larger relative share, is not in women's interests. Equality for women is impossible within the existing economic, political and cultural processes that reserve resources, power and control for small sections of people. But neither is development possible without greater equity for and participation by women."

### Education Ensures Equal Treatment of Women

by Iftikhar Ahmed Chowdhury

NE need not mention the reason behind treating 'female' as the weaker sex in our country. It is true that in a male chauvinistic social order like ours, women have always been the worst victims and have continually been treated as an object rather than an individual being. Lack of female education remains one of the most overriding causes of their subordination to the male popula-

Politicians, planners and others wax cloquent on the importance of female education and it's beneficial impacts on an individual and society. But in practice an attitude of nonchalance is the rule of the day. In some cases women of our country themselves forget the importance of education and it's import on society as a whole. A iew well-to-do urban women are fortunate to receive proper education, no matter what their option could be. But the vast multitude of female population who come from poor family backgrounds and live in the semi-urban and rural areas of Bangladesh are scarcely educated.

The obstacles which are responsible for holding back the spread of female education in our country are: infrastructural

Enrolment

Primary

Secondary

Higher Sec.

University

Teachers

Secondary

Higher Secondary

Dropouts (Approx)

Polytechnic only 1 for women

Primary: 20%

Secondary: 25%

Primary

tude and poor law and order environment. Of course, poverty is the main bar to any significant amount of educational promotion, be it male or female. Children need to work, cannot afford to buy books and uniforms etc. Schools are not within reach and they are not properly maintained. Teachers of various schools are not competent or regular, so there is an obvious lack of accountability. The practice of 'purdah' for women acts as a vital constraint. Parents who are solvent, mostly come from an orthodox religions background and are very reluctant to send their children to schools with co-education. Reluctance to send them to schools are further threatened by the state of lawlessness and insecurity. Kidnapping or disappearance of a female student of the secondary level is no more uncommon. A dominant male environment in secondary schools discourages girl students from taking lessons. Even most of the school timings do not adjust to work pattern of the village children.

female education and it's difference with that of a male population are shown in the

Male%

6,246,000

1,879,000

105,000

54,000

153,000

106,000

145,000

The existing scene of a

Female%

# Asian Women Yet to be Considered Equals

SIA, par excellence, is the continent of the A great leap forward in food production. Millions more people are being fed than ten years ago. Many countries for the first time in recent history have become self-sufficient in

But this so-called Green Revolution has been at the price of enormous social upheaval affecting in particular the poor, but most of all poor

Although women have risen to the top of the political tree, Indira Gandhi in India, Corazon Aquino in The Philippines, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Mrs Sirimavo Ratwatte Dias Bandaranatke in Shri Lanka and the Nobel Peace Prize winning leader of the opposition in Myanmar, Mrs Strima Aung San Suu Kyi, and there are moreover tens of thousands of highly educated professional women in all walks of life, nevertheless millions of women live in extreme poverty, in many cases explotted, even oppressed by the societies in which they live.

The life expectancy of women, perversely, is often lower than that of men, their literacy rate much lower and their workload significantly greater. Even so there are many countries and regions that break the trend. In Shri Lanka, in the Indian state of Kerala and in China, women clearly have significantly improved their quality of life despite the lower levels of income. Again in most of the high-growth economics, Japan, South Korca, llong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, women have seen their own condition improve with the general rise in prosperity.

Indeed, the emancipation of women in many of these societies has bucked custom. showing how change is possible once economics begin to grow and ideologies to change and the traditional outlook of men is firmly challenged.

In China and Korea the Confucian patriarchal family culture kept middle-and upperclass women confined at home. However, the same Confucian system, by decreeing shared inheritance, provided women with the chance, once other changes were afoot, to improve their condition.

In China the revolutionary cthos of the Communist Party accelerated change and now, while women are still by no means equal to men, they live with quite different opportunitics and status than their mothers and more so their grandmothers.

In South Asia, the majority of women still live at the bottom of the social order. Both Hinduism and some interpretations of Islam perceive women as subordinate and inferior to men. The early Indian law book - the code of Manu - gave women, regard less of caste or class, a status equivalent to the lowest order in society and prohibited them from inheriting property.

Unlike Hinduism, Islam granted women legal rights. A women had the right to be asked for her consent in marriage, she could inherit property and even, in some circumstances, ask for a divorce. For all that, women were expected to stay in purdah.

Despite all attempts at reform - the Hindu Code Act in India giving women defined legal rights and the Muslim Family Laws in Pakistan and

Bangladesh, limiting men's absolute right to polygamy and divorce - the status of women in real life in South Asia has

changed exeruciatingly slowly. in contrast, women in southeast Asia traditionally enjoyed a higher degree of social status because of the bilateral

kinship system, in which an individual traces his descent from both parents, reinforced by an ample supply of farming land. Women have always held important decision-making authority over property and

The traditional sexual divi-

sion of labour in Asia varies from country to country, from culture to culture. Under the modern-day impact of industrialisation, migration, revolution and ideological change it has undergone a fast change that shows no sign of abating. Nevertheless, it is possible



Women have to go a long way

to discern clearly defined patterns of behaviour and practice in different countries and comparison throws into interesting relief the varying conditions of women in rural society. In the Philippines(1) a 1985 study of a group of villagers in the irrigation project in southern Luzon island revealed that the sexual division of labour was by no means rigid. In rice-growing areas women were mainly responsible for planting, transplanting, weeding and harvesting, while the men prepared the land and ran the mechanised jobs, applying fertilizer and spraying chemicals. But when the women were away the men would cook, weed and transplant the rice. And if the men were away the women were quite comfortable taking over their jobs.

In Bangladesh, in marked contrast, until relatively recently, Islamic tradition kept the women contained mainly within the family compound Only women from the poorest families went out into the

But every small fluctuation in a woman's income is immediately reflected in the children's well-being.

Generally speaking in South Asia, the poorer the family the more dependent it is on the women's wage. A study made in Nepal<sup>(2)</sup> shows that, if the output of subsistence goods in rural households is valued on the basts of what they could be sold for in the market, women in the poorer families contribute as much or even more than the men. And even that calculation excludes what women contribute to a family's welfare with cooking, water supply and child care.

schools. On-going refresher teacher

Revision of school curricu-

Source: BANBEIS, 1987. There is a skewed distribution, with school concentrated in the urban, more developed areas l

It was high time that the rate of female education be increased in our country for the betterment of the female in particular and nation in general. Because as a nation we cannot prosper without the joint effort of both sexes. The options that are in hand to increase female education in

our country are as follows: Increase the number of school and introduce shifts in

existing schools. increase girls enrolment through various incentive

schemes. Recruit women teachers for both primary and secondary

training courses to include concepts of gender equity, particularly legal rights.

lum to relate it to actual needs of women, it should be made to understand that women should be educated not only to be good house-wives or mothers, but prepare them for future employments.

Close inspection and monitoring of schools should be carried out by upazila and cducation directorate personnel.

Low-cost mass education programmes should be initiated, through local community development programmes.

Adult education programmes should be targeted for women between the ages of 18 to 40. These programmes should include skill development, social awareness, legal

rights. To introduce them to work in upazilas, unions and villages some efforts should be made for their security and housing. improving income-generaling opportunities by school

children, such as, small poultry rearing project, small and cottage industry etc. But above all, our national perspective or the view point

should be immensely broadened to accommodate female not as a lesser counterpart, but as an equal without whom all development efforts are bound to go in vain.