

Women in Bangladesh Face Insurmountable Odds

by Meghna Gubathakurta

WOMEN 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.

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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

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

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 post-harvest 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.

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Household chores go unrecognised

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Asian Women Yet to be Considered Equals

ASIA, par excellence, is the continent of the 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 food.

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 upper-class women confined at home. However, the same Confucian system, by decreasing shared inheritance, provided women with the chance, once other changes were afoot, to improve their condition.

In China the revolutionary ethos of the Communist Party accelerated change and now, while women are still by no means equal to men, they live with quite different opportunities 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, regardless of caste or class, a status equivalent to the lowest order in society and prohibited them from inheriting property.

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 exasperatingly 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 land.

The traditional sexual division 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

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 fields. 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⁽²⁾ shows that, if the output of subsistence goods in rural households is valued on the basis 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.



Women have to go a long way

Women Take a Leap Forward

by Hameeda Hossain

IF 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 direction 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 rallies; 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-

sion among communities. December 1990 also saw the rising solidarity of women garment workers. Following 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

marched along the embankment 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

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from many factories all over Dhaka showed their solidarity against the brutal conditions of work. In subsequent strikes and demonstrations in 1991, thousands of workers from at least 40 garments factories who demonstrated for fair wages, proper contracts, and an end to harassment, were attacked by police, factory guards and mastans. Women workers demand that if the garment industry is to be an instrument for economic growth, there must be a trade off for their labour.

In November 1990 a more militant struggle was launched as a politically influential 'shrimp lord' backed by his armed men used force to take over Polder 29 in the Bay of Bengal for shrimp culture. In protest, large numbers of poor, unarmed women and men

Caruna Sardar. Her mutilated body bore testimony to the fact that the pursuit of profit and foreign exchange is not concerned with human suffering.

Violence has become a common means for enforcement of economic and political power. 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 through a social recognition of legal rights. In the interests of gender equity women have been pressing for the introduction of uniform personal code, which does away with discrimination between communities as well. They have demanded ratifica-

tion of UNCEDAW without reservation, as well as other UN conventions 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 garneries, 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 religions.

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 emphasises 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.

Education Ensures Equal Treatment of Women

by Iftikhar Ahmed Chowdhury

ONE 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 population.

Politicians, planners and others wax eloquent on the importance of female education and its beneficial impact 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 its import on society as a whole. A few 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

constraints, organisational inability, orthodox religious attitude 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 'pardah' for women acts as a vital constraint. Parents who are solvent, mostly come from an orthodox religious 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.

The existing scene of female education and its difference with that of a male population are shown in the tables

Enrolment	Total	Male%	Female%
Primary	6,246,000	56	44
Secondary	1,879,000	67	33
Higher Sec.	105,000	79	21
University	54,000	77	23
Teachers			
Primary	153,000	82	18
Secondary	106,000	90	10
Higher Secondary	145,000	91	09
Dropouts (Approx)			
Primary: 20%			
Secondary: 25%			
Polytechnic only 1 for women			

Source: BANBEIS, 1987.

[There is a skewed distribution, with school concentrated in the urban, more developed areas.]

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 schools. On-going refresher teacher training courses to include concepts of gender equity, particularly legal rights. Revision of school curriculum 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 education 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-generating 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.

— (IFAD)