

# Career Women Confront Hostilities All Around

by Tulip Ibrahim

"I have a good job, an enduring sturdy marriage and wonderful children", says Mrs Ali. "But our family life is barely under control. We're all scheduled so tightly, everything is in danger of collapsing."

Mrs Ali, an efficient secretary, voices her sufferings of what can be termed as 'two-career couple distress'. In fact, this problem, coupled with hundreds of other, is one of the manifold challenges of today's working women. In families of working parents, it is only the women who are fighting to balance work and family. Because of their double role the working women face a costly, necessary split within themselves. Could they invest themselves in a successful career and still be able to nurture a family?

Unfortunately, women of Bangladesh fit in with the lowest human stratum among all countries in the developing world. A very small number of women become professionals. Most of the women work as domestic servants, agricultural workers, weavers, labourers, and even construction hands. Thirty lakh women are involved in active civilian labour forces as opposed to 270 lakh males.

The major obstacle to women's development of their fullest potential comes from their low literacy rate, which is less than half of their male counterparts of 31%. In spite of the constitutional guarantee that "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life", and despite the enactment of some legislation, the legal and specially social status of women in Bangladesh is far from being equal.

In the hard struggle for existence, few low and middle class families can exist comfortably on the income of a single earner. More and more women are seeking jobs to add to the family's income. Breaking the age-old social barriers women now join the males as co-bread earners. Often they may be earning one-third to half of the family's income.

But it is not an easy task to come out of a society that has been incapacitated by illiteracy and riddled by prejudice. It is so very obvious that women fight for equality while still being trapped in a sea of

inequality. Sexual harassment at work is quite common. Working women form lower and middle class families are often looked down upon. False accusations or excuses are used in times to degrade them to leave work. Office women suffer discrimination and rarely reach the peak of their

The working woman often face social discrimination. They march forward with hopes and aspirations, but some prejudices still remain. Working women of the lower or middle class families face the problems of finding a husband. Ignorance working at the root of their beliefs, many men

puted firm to support her two young children. At home her peace is spoiled by gossiping neighbours who are for ever discussing about the late hours she sometimes has to work for. To these talking neighbours she is a "bad and fast woman."

Two-old roles of working women as homemaker and income earner results, in pressures unheard of a generation ago. They are working for home and office and trying to do well in both. They are also responsible mothers who look after the emotional and physical growth of the children. At home the mother of today still makes herself responsible for the happiness of the family.

But her role has increased by leaps and bounds. She spends a tremendous amount of mental and physical energy for the welfare of her family. And this calls for equal participation in life by the working couple. In joint families working women seldom get any cooperation from other family members in her dual responsibilities. Some husbands of these married women realize the need for additional income for a happier family.

But at the same time they stubbornly hold out that their wives are working for personal recognition and hence the problems arising remain for the wives to tackle themselves.

Many of the working women complain of the back-breaking weekends they spend. Week ends for these women means extra cooking, cleaning and entertaining. The husbands most cordially invite guests on weekends. But they themselves remain aloof from the additional work at home. For the male partner of a working woman weekends are days to relax and enjoy delicious meals cooked by his wife. In some cases where the husband helps the wife at home, the husband is seen as being "effeminate", by his friends.

Some working couple face marital problems. Wives working in senior positions have jealous husbands. These husbands suffer from inferiority complex, resulting in conjugal conflict. Even the wife's male colleagues are regarded with suspicion.

Some poor and middle class families assert special claims on daughters-in-law. And if she earns money, that is also con-

sidered to be theirs. Jharna Khan, married to a middle class family completed her M Sc before her marriage. After much persuasion her mother-in-law consented to allow her to take up a well-paid job with the condition that Jharna would surrender her salaries to her mother-in-law.

The unnatural job load of working women at home and office make them the victims of job stress. Defying the age-old blind beliefs and breaking the social barriers are no easy task for the woman of today. Even when they do stand on their feet, the march forward is not always smooth.

Despite the emergence of working women as a new income earning generation, their responsibilities at home remain as demanding. In fact the working women's jobs of home keeping and child rearing are equal to those of the full time house-wife.

In agriculture the vital role of women remain unrecorded and unpaid. They not only work in the fields along with their male colleagues but also husk paddy, rear poultry, plant trees, fetch water, rear children and gather firewood. Without a helping hand they do hundreds of chores and still manage to set aside time to earn additional money by producing small handicrafts such as bamboo fans, earthen pots or other house-hold utensils.

In Bangladesh women constitute the single largest group of poor people. Any significant reduction of poverty is not possible unless a strong move is made to expand gainful employment to women and obstacles to their development.

The development of society depends on the harmonious development of all its constituent elements. Man's progress depends on women's progress and is part of it. Women have stepped out of home to stand beside the men as true comrades in earning for the family, earners. And this calls for men's greater involvement at home. Men should be getting more into the picture of a well kept home. This would include men's participation with women in all spheres of their family life.

The collision of these dual commitment would challenge the 'topping skills of man and women as equal partners in life.

# Pakistani women Stand up to be Counted

Ayesha Khan writes from Islamabad

FOR the first time in Pakistan the issue of rape and violence against women is no longer taboo and has entered the arena of public debate. Behind the change is the alleged gang-rape of Veena Hayat, a friend to former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and daughter of a veteran politician. Veena went public last

police officers had gang-raped her. Khurshid Begum took her case to court with the support of a legal aid society and a voluntary organisation - War Against Rape - which offers help to victims. A few weeks earlier, Asma Ayub, a lower-middle class resident of Rawalpindi, was detained one night at a local

ical parties. In response to the Veena Hayat case the government has appointed a judicial tribunal to investigate her allegations. Since the Hayat family members announced they had no faith in a judicial system controlled by those accused of being criminals, they refused to give their testimony. Nevertheless, the tribunal



Time to lift the purdah?

November with the story that she had been raped at home by five men, sent to punish her for the friendship with Bhutto. She believes the rapists were working for Irfanullah Marwat, home affairs adviser to the provincial Sindh government.

Demonstrations led by women, human rights activists, and the opposition lasted for weeks throughout the country. The event was dubbed a "political rape" by the media and most activists.

Although rape often occurs in Pakistani society, it was widely felt that this rape, of an upper class woman and for supposedly political purposes, was the last straw.

The same week, in sharp contrast to the elitist flavour of the Hayat case, a poor woman from Karachi whose husband was in jail on charges of belonging to the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP), also went public with charges that while interrogating her

police station for interrogation on charges of theft. She alleges two police officers beat her to extract a confession and later raped her.

Asma took the unusual step of filing a case against the officers, which was tried in a special court established by the government to settle within a month cases that have outraged public morality.

Defence lawyers argued that Asma conjured up allegations of torture to avoid charges of theft. The judge acquitted her, by giving them the benefit of doubt.

The case had the unprecedented effect of rallying support from members of the Jamaat-i-Islami, a right-wing political party, as well as women's rights activists and members of Bhutto's PPP. These groups believe that the government has failed in its duties if law-enforcing officers are permitted to rape and torture women.

A former PPP member of parliament, Amina Paracha, says that the increase in violence against women is due to state support for criminals. She argues that since Pakistani politicians rely on police and intelligence agencies to keep their local power base intact, they cannot afford to alienate these officers by punishing them. Instead they give their tacit support to tactics of violence and intimidation.

However, the most senior woman in the government, Deputy Senate Chairperson Dr Noor Jahan Pamezal, rejects this as an unnecessary "politicisation" of the issue.

She blames lack of literacy among women, and the influence of customary laws which discriminate against them as the real cause for violence.

She says the government is taking measures to improve the situation, but its work is being obstructed by the angry accusations of opposition polit-

exoriated the accused official of any involvement. It simultaneously admitted that its investigation was incomplete.

Additionally, the officer in charge of the Criminal Investigation Agency in Sindh, Samtullah Marwat, whose organisation is allegedly involved in the case of Veena and numerous other human rights violations, has been removed.

Women activists are dissatisfied with these steps. Asma Jahangir, Secretary-General of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, praised Hayat's courage for publicly accusing her rapists, but rejected the possibility that the government would provide her with justice.

This is because, according to Pakistan's Islamic Penal Code, there is technically no distinction between rape and adultery, which is any sex outside marriage. If a woman charges rape and cannot prove it with four adult male Muslim witnesses to the act, she may be charged with adultery, which is a federal crime. The maximum punishment for adultery is stoning to death. Jahangir argued at a seminar on Violence Against Women held recently in Islamabad that because of this legal trap, she would not advise any rape victim to go to court.

According to Slogon, a monthly legal journal, 234 rape cases were reported in Pakistan between January-September, 1991. No statistics are available to indicate whether the number of rapes has changed over the years, but human rights activists claim only a fraction of all cases are reported.

As a result of the unprecedented publicity surrounding a few of these cases, seminars and workshops bringing together members of a wide range of organisations are being convened for the first time in major cities.

Gemini News

# Western Development Projects Fail to Help African Women

by Wanjiru Kihoro

THEY were shocked. We were looking at summaries of the agency's projects in Africa. But here was I, an African woman on the grants committee of a British aid agency, suggesting that we scrap a paragraph that dealt with "gender implications".

My colleagues protested. The paragraph was very important, they said. At least it forced project officers to consider the role of women. I argued that in most cases it was quite clear that the projects officers had not paid any serious attention to gender

issues. So why pretend? Many of the projects were described as having women participants - but the question of what kind of participation was never addressed. Neither was the question of

control and decision making. Foreign aid agencies are seen to be playing a vital role in meeting the basic needs of underprivileged women, especially those in rural areas. But if planners do not see what the women are already doing in their societies the projects will fail. Let me give you a classic example that happened in the Gambia during the mid-1980s.

It was a rice production project, funded by an array of international agencies and charities. The planners automatically assumed that the households were headed by men - either husbands or fathers who managed the resources on behalf of other members. They also assumed that the rice-growers were men. Credits and inputs were offered to men - who took them. No one took the trouble to find out that it was actually the women who traditionally grew the rice for domestic consumption and who exchanged the surplus.

Worse still, the scheme was going to develop irrigated rice production on common lands to which women had secured use rights. With the support of project and government officials men established exclusive rights to these common lands, pushing women onto inferior plots to continue cultivating traditional rice varieties.

The women had to negotiate everything through their husbands. When finally they were expected to provide labour for free on their husbands' plots the women refused and demanded to be paid in full. The project was a fiasco.

This example shows the weight Western development planners have given to cash crop production (controlled by men) over subsistence farming (done by women). The principal economic activity in Africa is subsistence agriculture done by women - so why did the planners not invest development aid in this area, which would also relieve hunger?

They should know better by now. Already back in the mid-1970s women had been 'discovered' by development planners - who simultaneously discovered that aid programmes had failed to eradicate poverty. Since then much

lip service has been paid to the equal participation of women in development.

The easy solution was to 'integrate' women into existing development models. There followed numerous income-generating handicrafts and nutrition education projects for women, some of which brought short-term help to a few people. But in most cases the 'double burden' of work already carried out by women was ignored. So was the low status of women which limits women's access to land, credit, machinery, markets for their products and control over any income raised.

Even after the UN Decade for Women (1976-85) highlighted and publicised the important - but previously unacknowledged - role of women in economic and social development this blind spot covering the role of African women remains.

Colonialism is largely to blame. It established a capitalist economy, created urban migration and left women to carry their own workload in addition to that of the departed men in the rural areas. The perceived inferiority of women to men - which existed in most precolonial African societies - was reinforced by the colonists and their religions.

National independence brought changes - but still no recognition of the central role played by women. For example, issues of women and development in most African countries are still dealt with by a Ministry of Culture and Social Development which is also responsible for youth, sports, culture and destitutes. African women are still, it seems, regarded as objects of recreation (as in sports), or art (as in culture) or social liabilities (as with destitutes) rather than assets in the development process.

So what can be done to attain women's real and recognised participation in development? Feminism is crucial for it provides a consciousness and a commitment to change which are the sources of energy that can mobilise women. It may be an emotive word in Africa but feminism is not a new or foreign concept to us. It was not imposed on us by

the United Nations or by Western feminists, but has an independent history.

As feminists from WIN (Women in Nigeria) have observed: 'One of the most recurrent charges made to and about Third World women is that of being blind copy cats of Western European feminists'. This is 'a divide-and-rule tactic, a 'ploy created and maintained to confuse women, to bind them to their respective men and male systems and to prevent a dangerous comparing of notes and political unity,' they conclude.

In so far as they are involved in the struggle for women's rights, African women are feminists. Opinions vary, of course. Strategies vary. Some believe that the battle to obtain equal rights with men within the existing status quo is enough. Men are seen as the enemy. Other feminists go further and ask: 'Has colonialism, neo-colonialism and development as we know it necessarily helped all African men?'

Poor countries cannot afford to pay foreign debts. They must be cancelled. Nor can we afford unsuitable development models that marginalise women. What we need is to create strong social movements involving both women and men who are committed to popular participation, sexual equality, and redistribution of wealth.

There are examples of such organisations growing in Africa. The Organisation of Rural Advancement and Progress (ORAP) in Zimbabwe, for example. Or grassroots groups like the Tanzanian Media Women's Organisation (TAMWA) and WIN.

Many African women now see no point in being 'integrated' into a mainstream Western-influenced development in which we have no say. Women are the group most harmed by the existing development strategies. So we will have to be the ones at the forefront in defining and creating a new self-reliant, people-centred development. - Third World Network Features/New Internationalist.

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African women have to find their own way out

**No Excuse...**

**A WOMAN'S CONTROL OVER HER FERTILITY, IT IS SAID IS "THE FREEDOM FROM WHICH OTHER FREEDOMS FLOW."**

**MOST GOVERNMENTS NOW ACCEPT THAT RAISING THE STATUS OF WOMEN, FOR EXAMPLE BY GIVING THEM EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES, IS A GOAL IN ITSELF.**

**A HIGHER STATUS ENABLES THEM TO BECOME MORE INDEPENDENT FINANCIALLY, AND MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS IN LIFE. AT THE SAME TIME, IT HELPS PROMOTE THE RIGHT TO FAMILY PLANNING.**

**GIRLS BROUGHT UP TO REGARD THEMSELVES AS THEIR BROTHERS' EQUALS DURING CHILDHOOD ARE LIKELY TO ADOPT FAMILY PLANNING AS ADULTS.**

**WITH EQUAL JOB OPPORTUNITIES, WOMEN WILL HAVE WIDER CHOICES, INCLUDING THE CHOICE TO HAVE OR NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN.**

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