

After Rio : What Next?

What is Needed Now is What was Needed Before

by Climate Network Africa

WHAT is the need after UNCED is exactly what was needed before: Northerners have to reduce their consumption to levels consistent with their fair share of the world's renewable resources; corporations and financial institutions that degrade the environment and exploit people have to be brought under citizens' control; Southerners have to build a movement and supporting institutions that enable them to take control of their own resources.

By endorsing transnational corporations' claims to "self-regulation," the World Bank's control of global environment funds, the myth of "free trade" and the need for more aid, UNCED has reinforced the barriers to sustainable development.

The North may have recognised that its own model of development is unsustainable, but rather than changing itself, it has used UNCED to control change in the South.

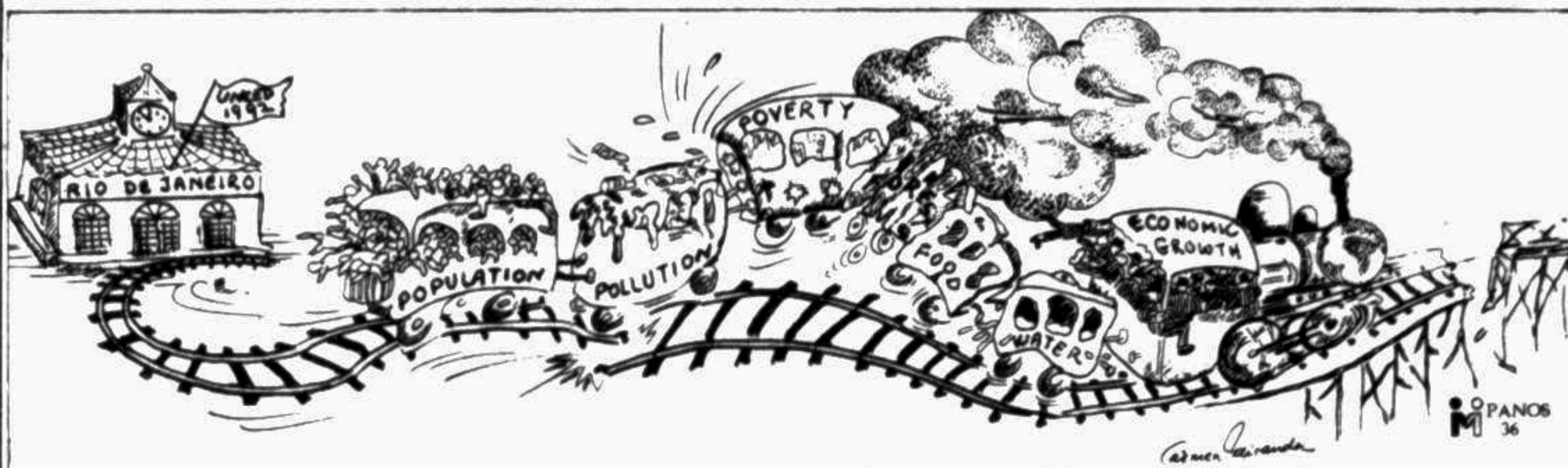
In the North, citizens must examine everything from the products they buy in their supermarkets and the media through which they inform

themselves, to the transnational corporations, financial and military structures that control the resource flows and "protect" their lifestyles. All this must be done with a view to restoring the balance in ecosystems and the balance between Northern and Southern resource consumption.

Southerners must stop fearing the North. They must protect themselves through democratic reform, environmental legislation, market regulation and other reforms that challenge national and international authority. They have to cut their dependence on aid by regaining control of their own capital and investing it to rebuild their societies.

NGOs have to stop allowing themselves to be "appointed" by the North to represent their people internationally and develop true representative structures.

As a first step, Southerners should cooperate in building networks and sharing information to foster broad participation in informed debate that is essential to sustainable development. /PANOS



In the wake of the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro, the Panos Institute asked a number of non-government organisations: After Rio — what next? Some had not attended the conference and felt unable to comment; one replied, 'I never expected much out of Rio and I cannot say much about follow-up.' Most of those from the South who replied considered that the conference had not addressed the concerns of the developing world. Here is a selection of answers.

Harnessing the Energy for Change

by Fran Spivy-Weber

THE Earth Summit was historic. Agenda 21, which prescribes interdisciplinary approaches for the complex environment and development problems of the coming century, will be a centrepiece in UN, national and NGO budgets as early as this year.

Treaties on climate change and biodiversity were brought to the table and they will be the focal point for those seeking to maintain the momentum of the Summit. The next challenge is ratification of both treaties by at least 50 countries, and then their enforcement.

It is unclear how the Rio Declaration (a leap down from the originally planned Earth Charter) and the Forest Principles will fare in the activism of the next decade.

Those who wanted an Earth Charter have set their sights on 1995, when the UN Charter is to be renewed. Those who want a real change in the relationship between people and forests hope to use the dialogue initiated in Rio as a starting point on the journey to-

wards binding agreements on the protection of forests and the rights of forest peoples.

Indigenous peoples, women, social action groups and business leaders around the world reached their own agreements on how they will work together and with governments to change course. At the end of the Summit there was the definite feeling that this large and disparate group of people were slowly turning toward the same direction.

Who deserves the credit? You do. Every citizen who wrote a letter, made a phone call, attended a meeting or supported a group on the road to Rio deserves praise for a job well done.

What's next? Using town meetings, community education and action, national and international networking and new and renewed alliances to ensure that the energy of the Earth Summit powers positive change in the way we approach environment and development. /PANOS

The writer is a member of the UN Citizens Network on UNCED.

Priority for a Poverty Convention

by Dr Atiq Rahman

EVERYONE in UNCED the UN Conference on Environment and Development agreed that sustainable development was the way for the future. But the key question — "Whose sustainable development are we talking about?" — was missing.

Form the two signed conventions on climate change and biodiversity the answer appeared to be: the sustainable development of the minority of the world's population which resides mostly in Northern countries.

Once again, the environment of the North was the issue, and development of the South was the poor sister.

The climate and biodiversity conventions have little di-

rect linkage to the lives of the majority of the world's people, particularly the poor. They must be given teeth, with protocols incorporating poverty issues.

Grave concerns were expressed in UNCED by non-government organisations (NGOs) from both South and North about the lack of consideration given to the importance of poverty in the UNCED process; it was only touched on in Agenda 21, which is supposed to be paving the way for sustainable development for the planet in the 21st century. As a result, many NGOs demanded that work on a Global Convention on Poverty should start immediately.

NGOs, and many delegations, stressed that there can be no sustainable development without eradication of poverty; that the rights of all people to access to food and other basic requirements for a healthy and meaningful life are inalienable; that the poor, both men and women, must be able to make decisions about their local environments and natural resources; that although poverty must be addressed on a global scale, there can be no solution without the direct participation of people at local and national levels.

The peace dividend in the post-Cold War era must be addressed and redirected to-

wards global poverty eradication; efforts must be undertaken to remove the most outstanding obstacles to poverty eradication and environmental conservation; the rich must pay the full ecological costs of their consumption. The global commons including atmosphere and oceans, belong to all people equally, including the poor.

Thus the most important post-UNCED initiative on global sustainable development would be a convention to address the most critical question facing the planet — which is poverty. /PANOS

The writer is the director of Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies.

A New Era of Global Management

by WH Lindner

UNCED, by any standards, was a unique process. It broke new ground in multilateral decision-making, in public participation and in the active involvement of independent sector organisations from throughout the world.

I believe that in retrospect the UNCED process will be seen as having commenced a new era of multilateralism in respect of global threats and global management.

Given the projected rate of continuing population growth, the ever-increasing integration of the global economy and the present need to address global threats with global management, multilateralism will become ever more operative as

we move into the next century. The challenge now is to build on the lessons and experiences of UNCED so as to develop adequate and effective mechanisms for broad public participation in multilateral decision-making processes.

UNCED laid the foundations, but much remains to be done if we are to develop mechanisms which allow a more open and participatory role for representatives of civil society to engage in meaningful dialogue with intergovernmental decision-makers.

One positive sign on the horizon is the creation of the

Earth Council, which intends to broaden the concept of public hearings throughout the world, in order to obtain inputs from all sectors of society on environment and development issues. If constituted and operated effectively, the Earth Council could add an important new dimension to multilateral decisions in respect of sustainable development policies.

Another area which needs serious reconsideration is the access of civil society organisations to the UN system as a whole. UNCED clearly demonstrated the benefits of opening UN deliberations to

groups other than those in consultative status.

This trend needs to continue and be strengthened: member states can no longer establish policies on global issues without the participation of those whose lives and futures will be affected by those decisions.

The cornerstone of any successful implementation of the concept of sustainable development is public participation. Every effort must now be made to ensure that new and innovative mechanisms for achieving that participation are found. /PANOS

The writer is the Executive Director of the Centre of Our Common Future.

Women and Children are Disadvantaged

IT is impossible to move around Dhaka city without being either directly accosted by beggars or confronted with the pitiful sight of

these scantily clothed and skinny specimens of the human race with their hands outstretched for alms. A glance will reveal that the majority

are women and children who are among the nation's most deprived and exploited. A report published by UNICEF and written by Raana Haider, tell readers the sad story behind their gaunt faces and looks of despair.

"Impressions of Women and Children in Bangladesh" is a well-researched report giving a comprehensive coverage of the subjects' status and position in society. The author draws much of the facts and figures from previous publications of various experts in the related fields of women and children welfare and succeeds in giving a bird's eye view of the situation. The text of the report is crisp and facts given in point form, making it easier to locate desired subjects. What makes the publication so "reader-friendly" are the numerous graphics, dramatic photographs and attractive layout, not to mention the use of quality art paper.

The proportion of females to males in Bangladesh is more or less the same. Yet, the huge number of women is not translated into equal rights in the form of equal wages, nor can be mobilised into effective pressure group to fight for their rights. It would amaze officers in the Geneva-based ILO agency to learn that "in addition to their domestic work, women work twice as many hours as men for only one-tenth of the income." Why do women in Bangladesh get such a raw deal? Discrimination against them seems to start early in life. The figures speak for themselves: Only 50% of girls are enrolled in primary schools compared to 70% of boys; for every 100 students attending secondary school, 60 are boys compared to 40 are girls. Women and girls at last, the leftovers of course! And the very same do heavy-duty household chores like fetching water and firewood.

Women are disadvantaged early in life and this subservience continues throughout their whole lives. More and more between the ages 40-44 are widowed, divorced or separated, leaving them to assume the responsibilities of head of the household. Yet, seldom do they get the respect due nor the remuneration commensurate with their labour. The report points out: "Inadequate food, unhealthy work-place, unsatisfactory sanitation in their houses, long hours of hard labour and insufficient sleep act as a great risk factor for women's health and potential as a worker." While the

emergence of garment factories has given women a chance to escape oppressive or destitute condition in the rural areas, one would hardly describe this as a "golden opportunity". In a survey of 1,000 garment workers, it was not unusual for some 52 per cent of them to put in 3 hours of overtime daily — for which they were seldom compensated, on top of which they had to endure humiliation like sexual harassment, lack of rest room facilities and lower wages than men!

In the midst of such suppression, it is indeed heartening to witness the outstanding contribution of organisations such as the Grameen Bank which has put its faith in women creditors and proved justified. While ordinary banks shunned the landless collateral-less women, the Grameen Bank stepped forth and encouraged them to be self-reliant by giving loans to back realistic projects like vegetable and fruit cultivation. The success of this policy is seen by the fact that some 800,000 women comprise 91 per cent of the total membership of the Grameen Bank's rural credit scheme. "Female loanes are found to be more regular in paying their weekly instalments compared to their male counterparts and their overall repayment rating is better than male borrowers, thereby disputing the myth that they are poor credit risks."

Women's traditional role as wives and mothers are closely analysed with breakdowns of statistical information regarding family planning, infant mortality and related incidents. We learn the startling fact that almost 65 per cent of child deaths can be avoided annually by relatively simple and inexpensive methods; and the total cost per child is only Taka 350!

There are numerous lofty sayings about children — such as: "Children are the greatest asset of mankind" (Buddha); and "Every time a child is born it brings with it the hope that God is not yet disappointed with man" — Tagore. For the millions of innocent child victims of abject poverty in Bangladesh, these beautiful words ring hollow. For those who survive the relative safety and nourishment provided by the womb, their continued survival upon entry in to the world is hampered by numerous hurdles among which are: acute respiratory infection related deaths, tuberculosis,

diphtheria, whooping cough, diarrhoea, pneumonia and pleurisy, to mention a few. All this the hapless child has to face within the first five years of existence. UNICEF, through sheer dedication and persistence, with the co-operation of the government and NGOs have managed to a great extent in reducing infant mortality through its successful scheme of immunization against common childhood illnesses and has reached remote rural areas. This on its own however, is insufficient protection. The greatest enemy to the mental and physical growth of children seems to be malnutrition — a slow but sure killer, whose manifestations appear in the form of stunted growth of mind and body, poor resistance to common colds and coughs and a host of more serious ailments such as blindness.

Apart from these "normal" drawbacks suffered by children, they also bear the brunt of the fallout from natural disasters. The reports indicate that the "impact of the floods of 1987-88 and the cyclone of 1991 was most severe on children and women of the rural poor population of Bangladesh." This is verified by statistics which show that of the 3.8 million sheltered in relief camps in 1988, more than one million were children. Much attention is focused on the numerous disadvantages faced by children, right from the moment of birth throughout their childhood. Fortunately, the picture is not entirely bleak. Bangladesh was one of the first signatories of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in January 1990. UN agencies such as UNICEF seem to be untiring in their efforts to tip the scale to give children a fighting change in life. Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is equally active in the field of primary education in rural areas. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit held in the Maldives in 1990 declared the 1990s the Decade of the Girl child — this may lead to some extent in correcting the gross imbalance in the treatment of female children.

Neglected Half Deserve Better

by Sanjida Karim Bably

IN a country where the annual GNP of our country is approximately only Tk. 50,000 crore, the poor are discriminated against — the women among them most of all. They are deprived of knowledge and lack in ability and independence. In this male dominated society, a married woman has to survive as a pet wife to her husband. She has no identity and will of her own. Her foremost duty is to remain obedient to her husband and perform all the hard duties and give birth to children almost every year.

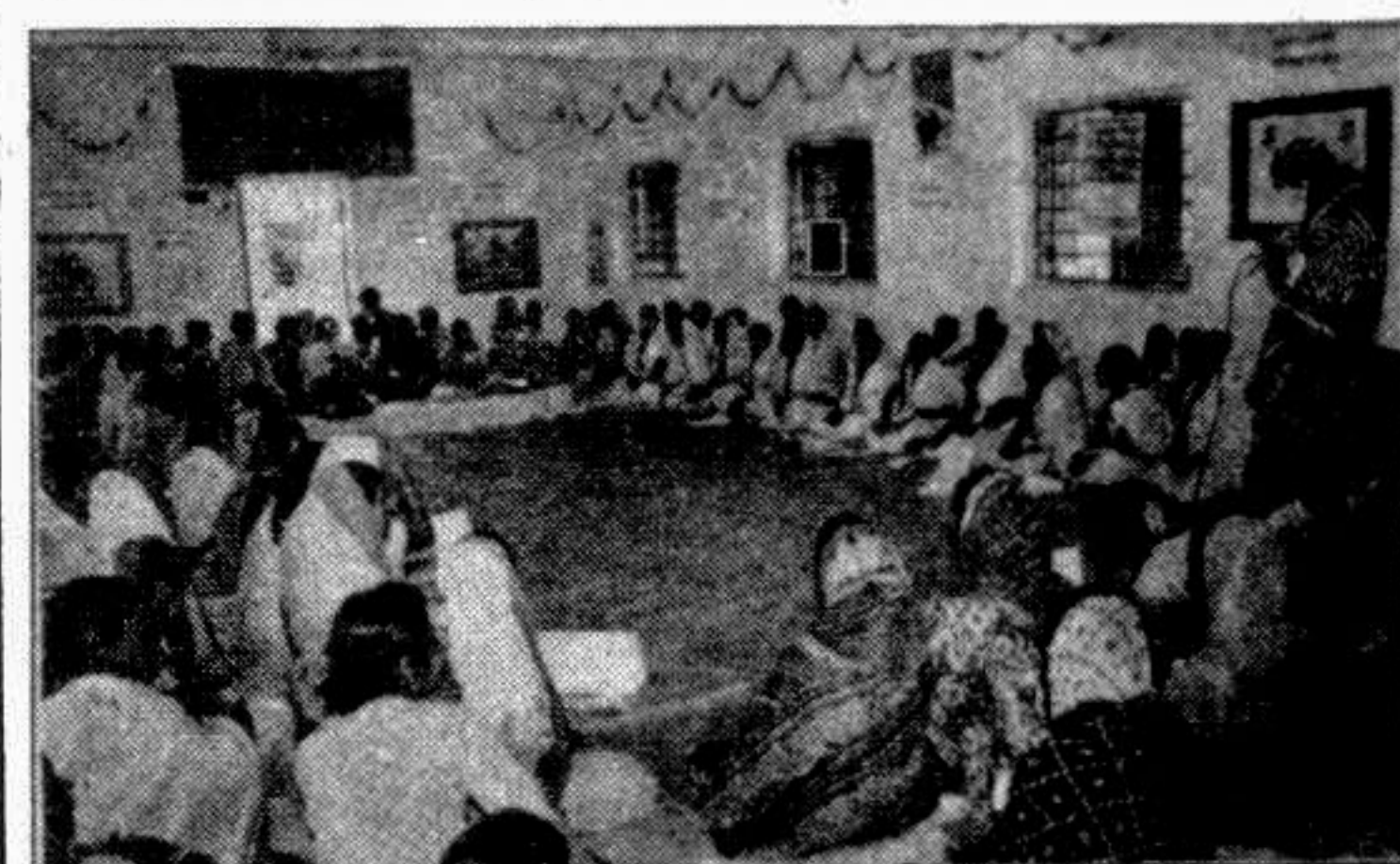
Besides her duties to her husband and children, there is another duty which is even more sacred, and that is her

strongest person in the world is she who stands alone.

Because of the social, physical and economic complexity of rural women, it is very difficult to assess how far policies and schemes introduced by governments have been effective. Tackling the problem of this complexity will involve many sectors at all levels. The importance of the education cannot be overemphasized. It must be wide in scope and operate at various levels creating awareness among rural women. Social preparation and provision for information and education of the urban poor woman are essential in bringing about a positive result. Rural women's basic education or literacy rate is very low. So to expand this base, facilities for basic education of women should be expanded. In Bangladesh situation, this may be done by using mosques for secular education along with religious education, recruiting more female teachers in schools and undertaking other measures to check drop-outs from schools.

Rapid increase in population greatly affects the health, nutrition and comfort of women. This is because in the prevailing social conditions, child-rearing is almost a sole responsibility for mothers. But eating last, they eat the least after serving the best of what is available to household heads and their children. Reducing the child birth results in more share of food for mother, more medical attention for them. Improving their functional knowledge to produce more food and utilize them better, the scope of home development education can be expanded. Such non-formal education, will include subjects like health nutrition, population education and home management.

A modern nation requires educated mothers. When educated, they teach their children healthcare and thus greatly contribute to the country's health service. Training in sewing, gardening, raising of chickens, etc, can be of great help to the welfare of the family and the nation.



Not all rural women are fortunate enough like them

Her life is burdened with several difficult duties to be performed from early morning till midnight.

She does not have any individuality and personality of her own. The husband is regarded as the master of the house, thus entitled to lay down the rules and expect that his wife conforms to those rules. Custom and convention demand that he should be guided completely by her husband and should in all respect adjust herself to his ideas, views, opinions and tastes. This means a rural woman has no opportunity to develop her own mind and individuality.

Her world is very small. Under the paternal roof, a girl has to adopt the opinions and views of her father and under the husband's roof she has to adopt the ideas and tastes of her husband. If she decides to liberate herself from the restraints under which she has been living without complaint, chances are that she will be divorced or tortured brutally by her husband or other mem-

bers of the family. In this case the rural woman does not have the courage to protect herself against injustice. Her life is full of miseries, poverty, superstitions and ignorance. She does not get the scope to realize that she has a mind of her own. A rural girl is born, grows up and one day withers away like a dew drop in the sun. Her life is often fruitless, without any purpose.

She must go out into the world and find out through experience what is right and what is wrong. She should not accept blindly the views of society and teachings of religion and morality. She should try to become self-reliant, must have confidence in herself to face the various problems of society. She should not survive as a parasite.

The urban woman gets the opportunity to establish her own identity. If necessary she can come out from the traditional bonds and restraints under which the individual suffers and her development is hindered. Therefore, we should encourage and try to educate the rural woman. She should realize that the

IMPRESSIONS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH



unicef United Nations Children's Fund

Impressions Of Women and Children In Bangladesh

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