



What Does Reproductive Right Mean?

I would like to share some of my thoughts with you all on a question that is still a puzzle for me: the question of reproductive right. Puzzle in the sense that like any feminists I also often use this word, but I wonder whether it articulates what I mean to say. Moreover I am not sure whether we feminists have given enough thought to its content. Words are not alphabets, they are discourses produced in a definite socio-historical condition and are signs of the state of consciousness of that society. Therefore we should remain continuously critical of what we say.

To be critical does not mean we should be narrow in our perspective. Many of the women from the south may say reproductive right is a very northern (or western) notion, and therefore not appropriate for the women of the south. I can't agree with them because notions should be judged on the basis of their ideological content that corresponds to the specific social condition of their existence. To judge them by geography, race or nation is a very narrow approach indeed.

By reproductive right one usually asserts the individual right of women over her reproductive power. Women often sensationalize the issue extending the concept to include the whole of female physiology: that is, it is the individual right of a woman over her own body. Such formulation may offer pedagogic advantage but we should pause a bit to reflect what is being distorted in this mode of articulation: female body is seen solely as a reproductive organ. This reduction of female physiology in our own discourse reflects uncritical acceptance of the image of woman corresponding to her status in a specific form of society, the society based on private property where women are owned by men as means of production of the human species.

But a woman body like a man is productive in a completely different way, the way like man she transforms nature for the satisfaction of the social need. I am talking about her role in the social production. Is it not true that overemphasising her reproductive role we are undermining her productive role? Are we not then falling into the trap of patriarchal ideology that reduces women's role into reproductive function only? If at all her role in social production is recognised it is admitted only to the extent it is necessary to realise her reproductive functions, such as raising the child, household activities, etc.

I can imagine that many of you will disagree with me what I am trying to say. It is hard to believe instantly that such a popular demand of women like reproductive right belong to patriarchal discourse. Let me then put forward a few more points.

What does it actually mean when we say that we want control over our own bodies? It may mean that we are in a state of slavery and demanding our freedom. What form of freedom we are demanding then?

In a bourgeois democratic republic a citizen is constitutionally and legally free. If she is a wage worker, have no

property and must sell her labour power to earn her existence, it does not matter. She is considered to be enjoying all the bourgeois right of freedom. Her unfreedom in the sphere of property or economic relationship is seen in complete separation from her political right. Economic and the political sphere are sharply divided in the bourgeois society. Since the wage worker is free, her right over her own body is recognized by the bourgeois society. When she sells her body to a capitalist

By Farida Akhter

individual owner of the means of production of the species own the product of our reproductive factory that lies within our body, all we will need then is to buy the semen from the market and use it as raw materials of production. Then, why we object to surrogate motherhood? Or to in-vitro fertilization?

Let us look at it from another angle. The concept of right is premised upon the concept of the free will of the individual. To realise that right a society must be established

margin of life in poverty coercion, militarisation and living in a politico-economic system dictated by external coercion that feel that our immediate task is to achieve a democratic society where both men and women can be free. In the process of achieving that society we will achieve our reproductive right as well, but not vice versa. I think many of my sisters from the south will agree with me, who are facing hard political question of achieving democracy in their own country.

If our concept of right only includes reproductive sphere, remaining insensitive to the right to be realised in the sphere of politics and economy, we are then operating within a narrow horizon, a horizon determined by the patriarchal culture. As if as women we should limit our demand only in the sphere of reproduction, while men should lead the sphere of politics and economy.

This demand has a sharp bourgeois imprint as well. Notice that we are demanding for the individual right of women over her own body. It is an ownership concept we are importing. Implicitly we are demanding that women should own individually the reproductive factory she is carrying within her own body. We are not saying that production of the human species is a social function. Bourgeois individualism blinds our vision so much that we fail to recognize our social being. It is important that we start to see that the reproduction of the human species is primarily a social activity which is realised through individuals, but it is never an individual affair.

Reproductive power of women is a natural power, appropriation of this power establishes a certain relation between men and women, between the individuals of a society. In this sense it is similar with other forms of appropriation of nature, land for example. But many of us while stand strongly for collective or communal appropriation of land and nature, at least from ecological and environmental concern, would think similar demand for reproductive functions as absurd. It is because it is a part of the body of a woman, and her body is the material basis of her self, her personhood, or her essence whatever you like to call it. This self is inseparable from her immediate material basis of existence, it is not external like land.

If so, woman is naturally in command over her body. She is by nature in possession of herself. Then what do we mean to make her a owner of her body?

But women's natural state is until now determining her social state. It is explicitly manifested in the gender division of labour, institutions of marriage and family, law of inheritance, etc. The social role of women is nothing more than the extension of her natural role. The positive kernel of the demand for reproductive right is that we are proposing to transform this natural state of human history. We are proposing a new relationship with our personhood and our body, a new social relationship with the society with regard to the natural power we carry



be exploited in factory she can enter into a formal contract with the capitalists for the job she is hired for. And she in turn recognizes the right of the owner of the means of production over the product of her labour. Social production takes place under this bourgeois law of private production and reciprocal recognition of right.

Are we talking about the similar kind of right? Are we proposing to earn for ourselves a kind of right where we would produce human species on the basis of the bourgeois form of production? In that case the product of our labour will belong to the person who hires us to produce the human product. Or reversely, we as an

on the basis of the sovereignty of the will of the individual. It is then a political question and related directly to the political struggle of the society where we should fight side by side with the men, and/or the men should fight side by side with us. But then why we are limiting our demand only to our individual body and not extending the demand to the body of the whole society? Do we think we have already been able to establish our right at the level of political sphere, at the level of the state, not to mention about the sphere of the economy?

Here emerges a different perception of the concept of the reproductive right. Many of us who are living in at the

within ourselves. The question of reproductive right then in essence is the question of destroying the existing social relation of reproduction and recreating a new one. But the new one, at least I can tell about myself, will not be acceptable to me if it is based on bourgeois individualism giving rise to a form of feminist ego insensitive to other human beings or individuals in a society.

To create a new relations of reproduction we should then learn to relate our demand for the dissolution of the existing forms of families based on private property, law of inheritance and property and the gender division of labour, etc.

Making this critique I would not propose you to give up this slogan, I would rather ask you to transcend from this level of articulation both theoretically and practically. This slogan is a historical phase of the development of the feminist movement, a phase which is historically necessary. But if we fail to move forward, our movement will remain a sectarian movement, incomplete and inadequate.

How Then Should We Pose The Question?

To transcend this historical phase of the feminist movement we should place our efforts to pose the question of right not upon any egocentric premise but upon the material basis of human history. For human history to continue, human beings must reproduce the species. That means men and women must relate in a determinate form of relationship with each other, not only in the sphere of reproduction, but also in the sphere of production. Because we must produce objects of our need. Until now, this history is a history of patriarchy and privatisation of nature and the means of production. Social form of these relationships, relations of reproduction in particular, is embodied in the institution of marriage and the laws of inheritance. These relationships are the basis of patriarchy giving men command over the sphere of social reproduction. It is time that we start to transform these institutions.

When we fail to do that we tend to seek solutions at the individual level. At that level technology becomes the answer to the social question. We start thinking that technology is emancipatory; and this is an illusion. Because in a patriarchal and coercive society technologies are bound to be coercive.

At FINRRAGE, we therefore resist technologies, not technologies as such, but technologies that are being produced at this phase of history where patriarchal relations are the dominant mode of relation of reproduction. By resisting patriarchal technologies, we are actually resisting patriarchy.

The question of our reproductive right then is a question of our larger project of social transformation. A right we want to establish on the basis of new relations of reproduction. I hope that we will be able to concretise more of our visions of this future.

(Presented at the FINRRAGE-UBINIG International Conference 1989 held in Comilla, Bangladesh)

— Ubinig

Violence Against Women

In observance of international women's day this year, the department of public information, in conjunction with the focal points on women's issues throughout the United Nations system, has chosen the theme of women's rights and human rights, with a special focus on violence against women. The reason is the special urgency of that issue in light of current devel-

opments in Bosnia and elsewhere.

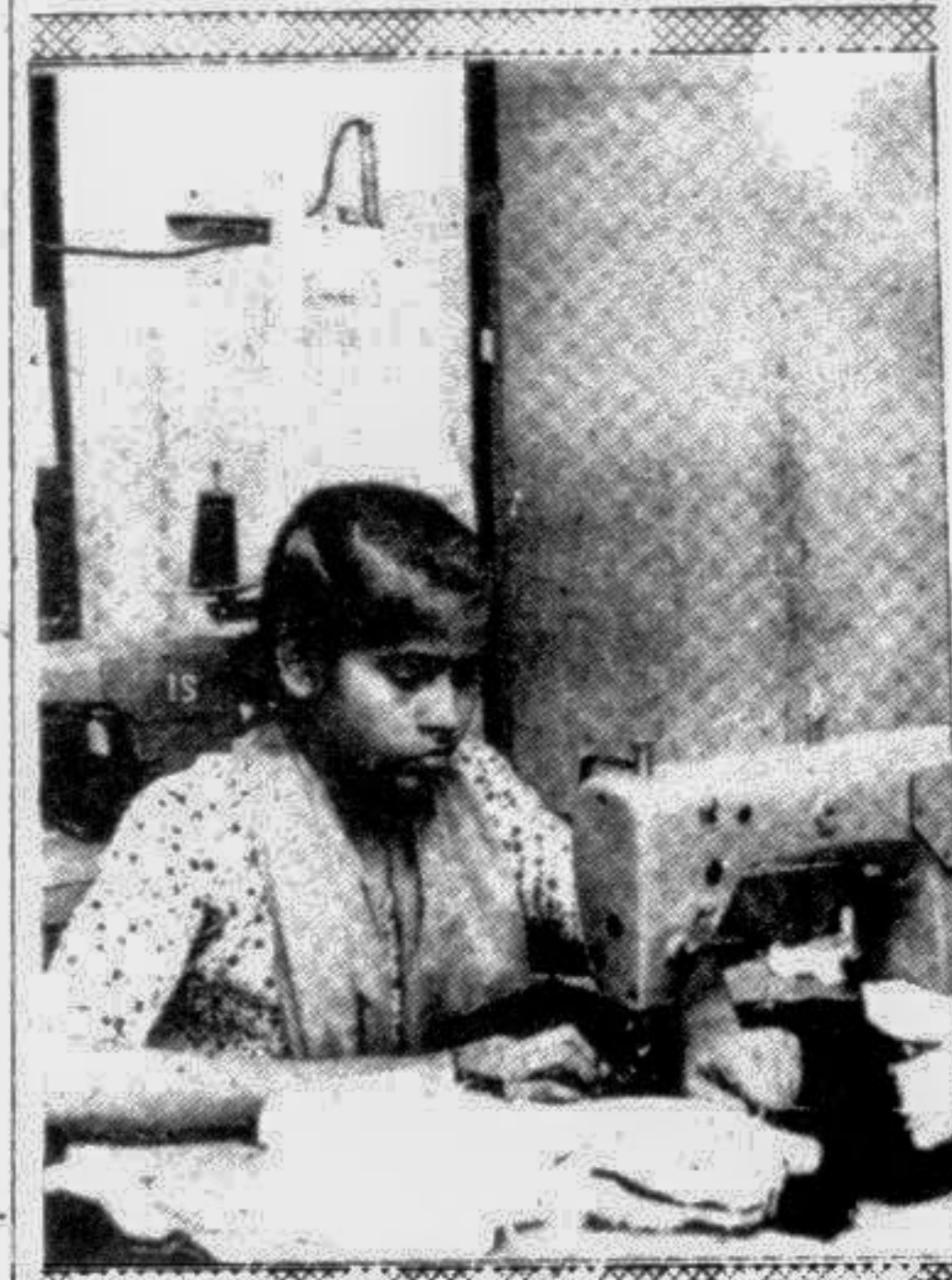
UN will be holding a panel discussion on violence against women at headquarters today with several women who play prominent roles in the fight against various forms of violence. It is being scheduled prior to women's day (8 March) in order to encourage press coverage on the day itself. The programme, which is now

being finalized, will encompass such issues as rape, female circumcision, sexual harassment, domestic violence, enforced prostitution, dowry deaths etc. It will also focus on what the United Nations is doing to combat violence against women, in particular the draft declaration on violence against women and the current investigations into allegations of widespread rape in Bosnia.

Country/Region	Domestic violence	Incest	Homosexuality in family	Sexual assault and rape	Sexual harassment
Developed countries	●	●	●	●	●
Africa	●	●	●	●	●
Asia	●	●	●	●	●
Latin America/Carib.	●	●	●	●	●
South America	●	●	●	●	●

Physical brutality and sexual abuse are wide spread largely because they have been sanctioned for centuries by legal systems which grant women no protection or recourse. In nineteenth century England and North America, as well as in much of the developing world today, even when a wife

in London and many not at all serious—some are just husbands killing their wives. Indeed, in all cultures men have had the right to kill their wives on suspicion of adultery until very recently. The same rules have not applied to male adultery.



Brief History

In 1857 on the 8th of March women workers in America, of garments and textile industries went on strike, demanding better wages and 10 hours of work instead of their usual 15 hours. There was no response within the next 50 years. There was strike and protest again, on this very 8th March 50 years later, which led to bloodshed. In 1910, Clara Zetkinson, a German Socialist leader took the resolution, at the second International Socialist Women's Conference, of observing this 8th March as International Women's day.

Diary of a Working Mother

By Shaheen Anam

woman's option and her right. Society should not judge and decide which has more value than the other. In the same way, on the other hand, when a woman feels that she is ready to take up a career outside her home she should be encouraged to do so. Giving birth to children and bringing up a family are all (social) responsibilities and should be recognized as such.

It is because of the same perception that work performed by rural women is not appreciated and not valued.

They are the mainstay of the economy. They provide that crucial support in food production and all other productive activity in the agriculture sector for which they have not received any recognition till very recently. Whatever she does, it is still considered domestic work and thus not considered important enough. Though my column is addressed to the urban working mother, today I want to write about one such

rural woman, and you tell me, if this is not work, then what is work?

She wakes up before anyone else does. She says her prayers, cleans the front yard, puts the rice to boil for the morning meal, feeds the cow, washes the children, feeds them and sits down to wash the clothes in the nearby pond. By the time I met Halima, at the Grameen Bank weekly meeting, at 8:30 in the morning, she had already finished cooking for the family and had washed all the clothes. She had come to return her weekly instalment of loan. She returns Tk 160 every week and in one year will repay the Tk 6000 she borrowed two months ago. She looked confident and happy: 'I have a house of my own and a tubewell too, all my children go to school.'

'What did you take the loan for?'
'To be able to have a house of my own, to buy good food for my children and to be able to send them to school. Now I

make bamboo mats and sell them at a profit.' The mat was proudly displayed to me. She makes 8 to 10 of those every day. The cost comes to Tk 4 per mat and sells for 10 taka each. She has been a Grameen Bank member for the last ten years and has taken about 20,000 taka in loans till now.

She has invested in poultry, paddy, and jute ropes, all of which have given good returns. She has never defaulted on a payment. But, I asked her in a shocked voice, when does she have the time to make the mats? With a smile she told me that when everyone goes to sleep, when all her work for the day is done, after the children have gone to bed, she lights the kerosene lamp and makes the mats.

Her words left me speechless. To be able to accomplish all that she does during the day, she still has the energy and the initiative to make those mats. I gazed at her in wonder and admiration. Who

else but a mother could put herself through such hard work and still come out of it smiling? It has been observed that when a woman has access to money she spends it for the welfare of the family. She invests in health, education and nutrition. I slowly realized what this loan meant to her and many like her. When a man takes loan from the bank he invests it in projects which become his full time occupation. But not so for the women. She takes loan on her own, and her quiet determination is her only guarantor. She gets no relief from her day to day chores in order to use the loan money, make a profit and repay back the loan. This is only considered to be her part time job. But this part time job has enabled Halima to build a house, educate her four children (her eldest daughter passed matric examination last year and now goes to the thana college) and, most of all, given her a sense of worth. She proudly said that since she became a Grameen Bank member she has never once asked her husband to buy anything for her. There was a peal of laughter from the other women in the group when one said with a sly wink that she had bought a lungi for her husband last Eid.

CRIME COUNTS

A group of armed men barged into the house of a widow at Tejkonipara where she lived along with her three young daughters.

The armed men ransacked the house and assaulted all the four house members. A teenage girl Anwara was admitted at the Dhaka medical college hospital.

While escaping the armed men fired gunshots and blasted dozens of crackers in and outside of the house.

According to some people, it was a sequel of a row over taking possession of the house. A 25-year-old housewife was raped by a group of gangsters at a village in Joydevpur.

Arju Banu, 25, committed suicide at the village — Karakandi, Keraniganj following a quarrel with her husband.

A DAY IN THE LIFE ON A VILLAGE WOMAN

5:00 am Wake up
Wash, say prayer
Clean dishes in pond
Make breakfast
6:00 am Feed husband and children, then herself
Carry water from pond, tubewell
Clean house and kitchen
Take goat, cattle to graze
Clean courtyard, stables
Milk cows
9:00 am Boil paddy, lay out to dry
Husk paddy
Grind spices
Husk rice before cooking
Prepare meal
11:00 am Cook meal
Wash clothes in pond
Bathe
Lunch, if three meals a day
Wash dishes
Make nets, sew
4:00 pm Bring cattle back, feed and secure them
7:00 pm Cook evening meal
Feed everyone
10:00-11:00 pm Retire
(Time devoted to child care is not included)

— Compiled by Farid Ahmed.