



# Feudal Attitudes Hamper Family Planning

Whether or not to have a baby — the choice is up to two individuals. Unfortunately, the future of humanity, and that of the planet itself, depend more and more on that choice. The explosive worries of the next decade are the environment and the population: the two are inextricably linked. During her visit to Dhaka, the Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, Dr. Nafis Sadik, spoke to The Daily Star about the population problems of South Asia, the role of religion, and the neglected responsibility of the male in limiting the size of a family.

**DS:** Where are we, in Bangladesh, in terms of our population programmes?

**Dr Nafis Sadik (NS):** Well, your contraceptive prevalence level is now something like 43 percent. The size of your family is about 4.5 children per woman. You had a doubling of contraceptive usage in the last ten years, which is a big increase.

**DS:** What are the reasons for this?

**NS:** Many couples don't think of spacing as their first choice in family planning. They think about ending child bearing as the main area of family planning. That means that the messages about the health benefits of family planning, such as relationship between infant mortality and child spacing, and the age of mother at first birth—these have not been communicated.

This is also showing up in the fact that maternal mortality remains quite high. Maternal deaths used to be 60 per thousand; it's gone down to 57 or thereabouts. That's a very small decline. With family planning you should see quite a significant decline in maternal deaths and infant deaths.

That we do not see that happening is due to the fact that women still have their children between the ages of 18 and 21, rather than start child bearing at 20.

The WHO studies which we financed on maternal mortality show that mothers who have children before 20 have a mortality level like 20 percent higher than those that have children later. Also infant mor-

tality is much higher for women who have children before 20. I think 25 per cent more. This is especially so in the developing countries.

If the children are spaced 3 or 2 years or 1 year apart, the mortality rates climb accordingly. If there is only 1 year difference, the young child is not properly fed. So, it is more prone to die early. So it's like a vicious cycle.

**DS:** Is sexual discrimination determining high maternal deaths and infant deaths?

**NS:** In the case of women in developing countries bearing children in their teens, it's also that girl children are so neglected as far as nutrition is concerned, they are nearly the last in the pecking order, next to the mother. If a mother is breast feeding a female child and she gives birth to a male, all the attention goes to the male child. Female infant

ing pregnancy and labour. Only when they have very severe complications are most women taken to hospitals. The root cause of all this is the low value and status of women.

While saying that family planning has been successful in raising contraceptive use, the size of family is not encouraging. Of course, this is an individual's choice — you can't dictate the size. Individuals must feel that it is in their own

**DS:** There's one rationale among the poorer classes, the numbers game: "if we have 7 children then with diarrhoea, cholera, we will have 2 or 3 left." Survival is related to health care.

**NS:** The more children you have, the fewer chances they get to fair health care. I don't think, though, that people decide to have more children as insurance. I don't think this is a well tested factor. The tru-

gious and social constraints. Yet the environment is tied to our population. What does UNFPA feel about this?

**NS:** I think that in Agenda 21, the major Earth Summit document, population is very well covered. There is a whole chapter on health, women, and science issues in demography. There were social recommendations on reproductive rights of women.

Unfortunately it got so

programmes: Tunisia, Egypt.

Mullahs are joining in the programme in Egypt. The Al-Azhar university gave a fatwa that family planning was very much within the tenets of Islam planning of the family was indicated by Islam's encouragement of breast feeding and care for the mother's health. These are statements in the Quran itself. We have a book called "Family Planning and the Legacy of Islam."

planning?

**NS:** Most of the systemic methods are for women. The barrer methods can be used both by men and women, but it requires the co-operation of both. Many men will not cooperate.

Research is going on on a male method which could be systemic, but it's more, difficult physiologically to find a male method. In the case of women, there is just one ovum to target. The physiology is more amenable to systemic methods because there's just one point of attack. It's much more difficult to produce such a pill for men.

Programmes are focused on women because women are the ones who suffer the consequences. Even if you say it's the responsibility of both, if you wait for the man to be re-

so on. But for abstinence to work, you need the husband's consent. And that cooperation for abstinence is certainly not there.

These are the reasons we talk about women so much in family planning. From some of the feedback we have, I think programmes need to be more overtly directed to men, at least in the area of responsibility taking. Even if the methods one not that many for men, they should be supportive in their role.

**DS:** There is a type of thinking that the money spent on family planning could be spent on education and health, and indirectly benefit family planning.

**NS:** The money spent on family planning is a pittance. It's only one percent of all overseas development aid. The two countries who spend a lot are India and China; if you take them out, the amount spent by developing nations is negligible.

**DS:** Within the UN system, does UNFPA get the support

## UNFPA's Dr Nafis Sadik, interviewed by Executive Editor, Mahfuz Anam, S. Bari, and Rafat Binte Rashid.



Dr. Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, is interviewed by Executive Editor Mahfuz Anam, S. Bari, and Rafat Binte Rashid.

interest, for their own health or whatever, to have a small family. They must internalize that need before they will really understand the concept for planning the family. People must have the number of children they can look after properly, and realize that it is in their interest to do so.

**DS:** What role do men play in this realization?

**NS:** There's no male responsibility for the children. Here, I hear all these stories about mothers being abandoned with 3 or 4 children. Apparently, this is a rising phenomenon and I think a very sad phenomenon. A single mother headed household is increasing. Again you have this concept that children are the responsibility of the mother, not of the father. Responsible parenthood has to be pursued.

The good of family planning is not only demographic, but also to improve the health and welfare of the individual. I'm sometimes a bit sorry that it's got so related only to demographic objectives. All the family planning pioneers started with the rights of women, the health of women. Somehow that has got a little bit lost. If we really pursued that as the objective, you would find that there would have been more success in the programmes.

ism goes on, like saying children are our old age security; that is not true. These are all myths that have been propagated, and we keep on saying them without testing if they still exist today or not. So much change has taken place. Mortality levels have gone down.

What we are now trying to tell women and men is that if you plan your family better, then they are all likely to survive.

The other thing being said is that children are an economic asset. To me that's the worst statement in the entire world. That means you produce children only to exploit and use them. I think here the compulsory education is a good plan, and I hope we can enforce it. And this free education for girls will be a tremendous asset. I hope it does not happen that girls go to school and then are expected to do chores in the household.

Education could take girls beyond a kind of glass ceiling. They can make their own life and not be dependent upon the community to decide they must be married off to the first available man and produce a child within the next year.

**DS:** Population was held to be a taboo subject at last year's Earth Summit, because of relig-

much publicity because some Catholic countries, like Argentina and the Philippines, got together with the Church, and had eliminated from the section on science and technology the development of a safer and more effective self-administered contraceptive. They tried to change the language from the term 'family planning' to 'responsible planning of family size,' which is such a long phrase.

In one way the media attention was good. Many governments which may not have said anything about population did make a point of talking about it.

**DS:** Coming from that, does religion still work as a force against family planning?

**NS:** Oh yes. It works more in countries where they are illiterate, because of beliefs like "The poor will inherit the earth," which the Catholic Church says. But the Church's influence in family planning is very limited. Both family planning and abortion are widely practiced in the West.

But in Islam, for example, there is nothing written against contraception. Individuals schools, however, have interpreted it as being against family planning in roundabout ways. But Muslim countries do have successful

hope it will be translated into Bengali.

**DS:** We need it in tons. You should address religious tenets as part of UNFPA's programmes.

**NS:** Copies will be coming here and we shall distribute it to the press and others.

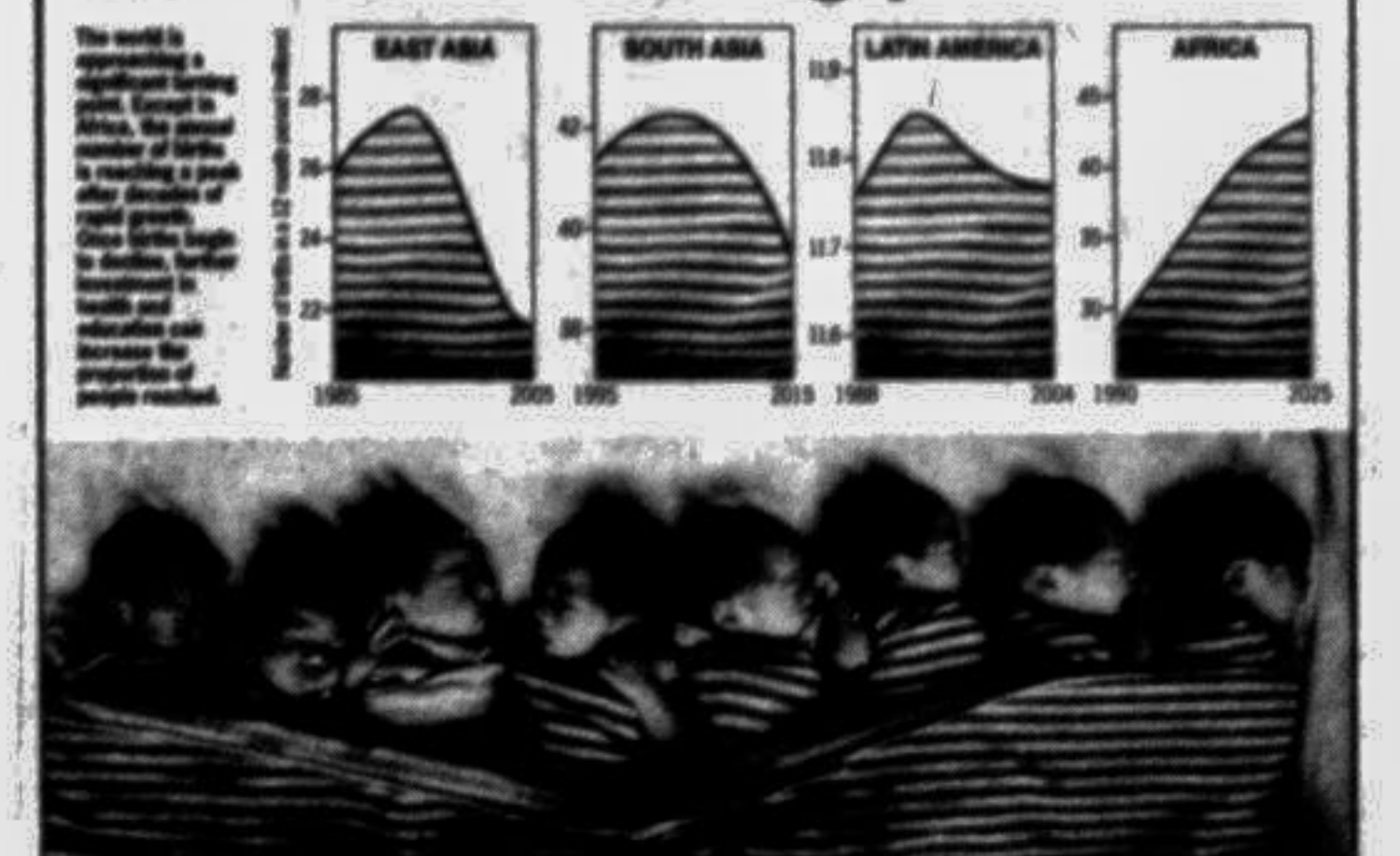
We have a programme in Al-Azhar for example. We bring schools from all the Muslim countries to Al-Azhar for seminars. Then they go to other countries on travelling seminars. They haven't been to Bangladesh. Maybe because Bangladesh was seen as not an overtly religious antagonism to the programme. I think people should be exposed to the teachings of Islam in a different setting. Tunisia, Algeria and Turkey have all been successful.

**DS:** But we haven't have such success in the region.

**NS:** Basically the SAARC region has a feudalistic attitude. The status of women is really low. Even if there are high, economic levels, like in Haryana and Punjab, the status of women is like goods and chattel. Reproduction is the only role of women and therefore they should keep reproducing; that's the attitude.

**DS:** Why are women the major target of practising family

## Births: the turning point



responsible, you will wait for a long time. Maternal mortality is high: half of the deaths are due to illegal abortions. That's an indication of how little the women wanted that next pregnancy. If you really want to deal with the health aspect and the social and psychological responsibilities of parenthood, you have to give the alternative to the woman.

The Church recommends the natural method. And now it is easier to predict cycles and

you deserve?

Well, increasingly so.

**NS:** Many UN colleagues are reluctant to talk about women's status. I was for a long time the only woman as head of agency. Now of course when I'm in a meeting everyone looks at me and makes sure they say something about gender activities!

**DS:** Thank you very much for your time.

## March 8: A Step Towards Justice

**'Violence Against Women' — the theme of this year's International Women's Day is in no way a fresh chapter in the book of 'discrimination and inequality'. Now it is charged with a revised approach.**

Violence against women is primarily a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between the sexes which has led to domination and discrimination against women and consequently to the prevention of their advancement. In different parts of the city on the 8th of March, amongst other organisations Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Ubini, Nari Raksha and Neerja Kori organised rallies, dramas, and discussions to stress—



Do they cry in vain?

"women's rights is an integral part of human rights." In this country as also in other countries, domestic violence against women is perhaps the most under reported crime, because disputes within the privacy of the family, even if they involve outright physical abuse, are often not perceived as criminal acts, either by the perpetrators by the vic-

tims themselves or by the legal system. Recently, however, some countries have made domestic violence a minor assault, thereby enabling the police legally to intervene. But it would be long when our country can take any such step.

Rape is yet another crime which goes largely under reported, due to the social stigma, the legal difficulties and the contempt shown towards raped within the society.

A woman's right to be free from danger and fear for her personal safety within the home, the work place and society is likely to be the toughest battle women will wage in the 1990s.

Eradication of these problems will demand a concerted effort on the part of individuals

— the non-government organisations and women's organisations, nation, which means the government as well as the opposition and other political parties and of course the entire international community. Internationally, there has been an increasing conviction that violence violates women's basic human rights. —by Rahat Fakhrida

**T**HE following is the text of the message by the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, on the occasion of International Women's Day (8 March) 1993: International Women's Day is a time to celebrate what women have achieved in their struggle for equal rights, social progress and peace. It is a time to speak honestly about the continuing oppression of women in many areas of the world and in many aspects of daily life. And it is a time to speak of what must be done to advance the cause of women still further.

The promotion and protection of the rights of women are central to the work of the United Nations. One hundred and nineteen countries — more than two thirds of the current membership — have subscribed to the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. The Declaration on Violence Against Women, now in draft, is expected to be adopted by the forty-eight session of the General Assembly. The Commission on the Status of Women is active in the promotion of women's rights. And, as half of all humanity is made up of women, women's rights are high on the agenda of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and of the World Conference on Human Rights, to be held in Vienna in June.

Within communities and at the grass-roots level, in places of education and employment, efforts need to be redoubled to ensure women are treated fairly and without discrimination.

In my own case, as Chief Administrative Officer of the United Nations Organisation, I have a responsibility to ensure that promotion and advancement are open to women. I have set a simple target: by the time of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations, in 1995, I expect to see the numbers of women working in professional posts at the United Nations to be reflective of the world population as a whole. I have appointed two women to high-level posts in recent months, as Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi, and as Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on

## Boutros Ghali On International Women's Day

Women: action for equality, development and peace, to be held in 1995. Within the Department of Administration and Management, I have appointed women to head, the Offices of Conference Services and General Services. I have also directed the Office of Human Resources Management to develop a targeted plan of concrete action by 1993-1994 to improve the status of woman in the Secretariat. Today, we have two women at the Under-Secretary-General and Assistant-Secretary-General level, and nine at the D-2 level.

More generally, acceptance and awareness of the rights of women — by public opinion as well as by Governments — have never been so widespread. Many countries have introduced legislation and encouraged policies which recognize the rights of women. Governments and Non-governmental Organisations in many countries are encouraging women to organize in self-help groups and women's co-operatives. Many women, particularly in the developing countries and in the new Independent States, are, for the first time in their lives, beginning to realize their potential and to develop economic self-sufficiency.

Communities benefit directly from the skills and energies which such activities release. They are also enriched by the collective activities of women which demonstrate the values of solidarity and cooperation.

In many countries, at the national, local and village levels, women are playing a more active role in civic life. Equality between the sexes, and the development of effective Governmental responses to the needs of women, will not come about until the voice of women is heard in politics. While there has been steady progress in the articulation and implementation of women's rights in many countries, a reversion to barbarism has occurred in others. Some countries have seen the use of systematic sexual violence against women as a weapon of war to degrade and humiliate entire populations. Rape is the

most despicable crime against women. Mass rape is an abolition. It is a symptom of the unrestrained and vicious form of warfare which is appearing in the wake of the cold war. War today involves more civilian deaths and casualties — including women — than at any time in history. The eradication of such criminal forms of warfare is high on the agenda for peace of the United Nations.

We look forward to the Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995. On that occasion, I hope to be able to report progress in the struggle for peace, women's rights and social justice. I hope that the new barbarism and punish those responsible. The struggle for women's rights, and the task of creating a new United Nations, able to promote peace and the values which nurture and sustain it, are one and the same. Today — more than ever — the cause of women is the cause of all humanity.

United Nations

## Milestones of advocacy for women's equality

Women, more than ever, are on the global agenda, as a result of 30 years of constant advocacy and pressure.

- 1946** The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women is formed to monitor the situation of women and promote women's rights around the world.
- 1952** The Commission initiates the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, the first global mandate to grant women equal political rights under the law — the right to vote, hold office and exercise public functions.
- 1957 and 1962** Conventions initiated on the equality of married women, guaranteeing them equal rights in marriage and in dissolving marriage.
- 1967** Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.
- 1975** International Women's Year. The World Conference on Women in Mexico City proclaims 1976-1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, Peace. Agencies are asked to collect through statistical information on women for the first time.
- 1979** The United Nations General Assembly adopts the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
- 1980** The World Conference on Women in Copenhagen adopts the Programme of Action for the Second Half of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. Agencies are asked to prepare the most recent data and time-trend analyses on the situation of women.
- 1985** The Nairobi World Conference reviews progress during the decade for women and adopts the Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women.

## Diary of a Working Mother

By Shaheen Anam

**M**OST working mothers for that matter perhaps do not even have the energy to read this column this month. The reason of course being the holy month of Ramadan. How on earth are mothers expected to add these extra activities to their busy schedule beyond me. But the interesting thing is they are and enjoying it in the process. As for me, I have still not figured out how best to cope with lack of sleep, iftar, sehri and dinner not to forget the much awaited Eid shopping.

The month of Ramadan and fasting would really be a joyous occasion if only we didn't have to wake up next morning and come to work, or at least if the children were off school. The schedule of the usual crazy morning scene is still very much on, only that poor mother has had to wake up at 3:30 in the morning for sehri.

It would not be so bad if she was the only one waking up. First the cook has to be awakened from her deep slumber in no less than 10 loud calls. She then wakes up the other maid and together they prepare the sehri. For some reason this is the time they choose to settle all their differences.

By this time ofcourse the four year old is up and wants to fast also. Finally around 4:45 the family is ready to go back to bed but the body is not ready to switch off and go to sleep after a heavy meal. Just when I am about to doze off around 6, there is a knock at the door, my older daughter wants some money for the play tickets she had told me about God knows when! Come weekend and the story is the same. I seem to be more exhausted after it than by the end of a working week. I wait for the weekend with such enthusiasm, vowing to myself that this time it will be just the family and plenty of rest. Just trying to sleep late is an exercise by itself. It seems all the hawkers, plying the streets know my address. They also like to come one after the other so that the door bell is constantly ringing. There are ofcourse the children who keep coming up with some request or the other, not to talk of the phone from well meaning friends. I finally give up and decide to complete all the tasks that I had set up for the weekend. The foremost among which at the moment, was to buy Eid sarais for the maids. The crowd at Gausia and Hawkers market seems to be increasing every year and I will not talk about the aggravation I felt just getting across to the shops. After pushing and shoving myself through the mass of humanity I finally managed to select something colourful. I had been duly advised to get something in yellow and purple. I came home feeling very pleased with myself and was relieved to know that the maids actually liked the sarais.

I had started feeling that I was the only tired one during Ramadan but I came to office

the other day and found my colleague dozing off. Between yawns she told me that last night she had to go to an iftar party which turned out to be dinner and did not finish till 11 pm. She again had to get up for sehri at 4 am and then at 7 am to send the children to school. I immediately felt better that I was not the only working mother struggling to stay awake. But talking about iftar parties, they are also a great deal of fun and is a chance to meet with family and friends. Attending such parties is one thing, but giving one is something else, and that also on a working day. Last week I tried it, but that is another story which I shall write about next week.

In spite of my complaints of being overworked and tired during Ramadan, this is a religious and social event that everyone looks forward to. It is a time to be generous, to think about others who are not as fortunate as ourselves. It is also a time for families to get together and renew bonds. Traditionally women are the ones responsible for taking care of all relationships. Working mothers have the added responsibility of their careers. This is the challenge they have taken up voluntarily and will certainly rise up to it.

