



Increasing Involvement of Women in Trade

WHEN Bangladesh came into being in 1971, Women's Movements all over the world were beginning to gain credence in the development scene. In the twenty years since in spite of the attention focussed on Women in Development (WID) women everywhere continue to lag behind men in equality of opportunity in health, education and employment. In South Asia starting from a very low base women have made some gains in health and education but not only do they continue to experience conditions below minimal acceptance level but these gains are not paralleled by gains in social, political or economic participation.

Situation of Women in the Decade of the 80s

Women comprise 49 per cent of the population of which 86 per cent live in rural areas. The mean age at marriage for a woman is less than 18 years and on an average she will give birth to about four children in her lifetime. Social norms which discourage widow remarriage and the wide age gap of ten years between married couples result in 90 per cent of the widowed population being female. Social and cultural norms together with intense poverty situation also put them in a vulnerable position so that women comprise 94 per cent of the divorced population of the country of which 54 per cent are below the age of 24 years.

The end result of the pauperisation process are female headed households which comprise 9 per cent of all households. About one third of these households are headed by widowed/divorced/abandoned women who constitute the poorest of the poor. Two thirds are female managed households when the male head or the male surrogate head has migrated in search of employment. These latter households are relatively better off than the widow-headed ones but compared to the male-headed households they are at a major socio-economic disadvantage.

Tradition and culture vying with economic necessity have put women at the cross roads of enforced change particularly in the rural areas. Thus women are entering the formal and monetised market in larger numbers but are at the same time burdened with the necessity to balance their unpaid household work with their market work. In doing so they are shackled by their lack of education and vocational skills which together with malnutrition force them into sectors with the lowest productivity.

The paper now looks at the changes that have taken place in the last decade in the fields of employment, health and education and in the participation of women in the political field.

Employment

In the decade of the eighties female labour force partici-

ipation in Bangladesh has increased at a rate faster than that of males. These rates are higher in urban compared to rural areas and show a shift from agriculture to non-agriculture, the major industries employing women being textiles, leather, food and beverages, wood and wood products, and non-metallic mineral products (e.g. brick, clay and pottery).

Women are moving from working as unpaid family helpers and from self employment to wage labour and they comprise a larger portion of the part time workers compared to men. Thus within a decade economic hardship has transformed women's labour from being unpaid and invisible to monetised and visible at least in some sectors of the economy. Disparities however exist in male/female wage rates the gap being more pronounced in the non-agriculture sector.

Unemployment rates are increasing for both men and women especially in the urban areas and the highest unemployment is faced by the 10-19 year old females. This would be an indication of the surplus labour force of the younger age group seeking employment in urban based industries like the ready-made garments industry where the average age of female workers is 19 years. The highest demand was for uneducated female labour mainly for domestic work and most of the surplus labour (both male and female) was from those completing secondary and high school levels.

Education

In the period between 1981-1987 literacy rate recorded only a 4 point increase from 20 in 1981 to 24 in 1987. (A recent BIDS study however estimated that literacy rate in 1990 was 45 per cent with female literacy at 36% and male rate at 54%). The rate of growth for females (from 13% to 17%) was the same as that of male (26% to 30%) so that the gap between them did not lessen. The major increase in female literacy was in the urban areas where female literacy rates increased from 26% to 38% in this period. This poor performance in the education sector was partly due to the fact that although there were small but regular increments in budgetary allocations in the Five Year Plans (4.4% of budget in SFYP, 4.9% in TFYP and 5.9% in TFYP) the real per capita public expenditure index in the education sector showed a declining trend falling from 13 in 1985/86 to 10 in 1987/88.

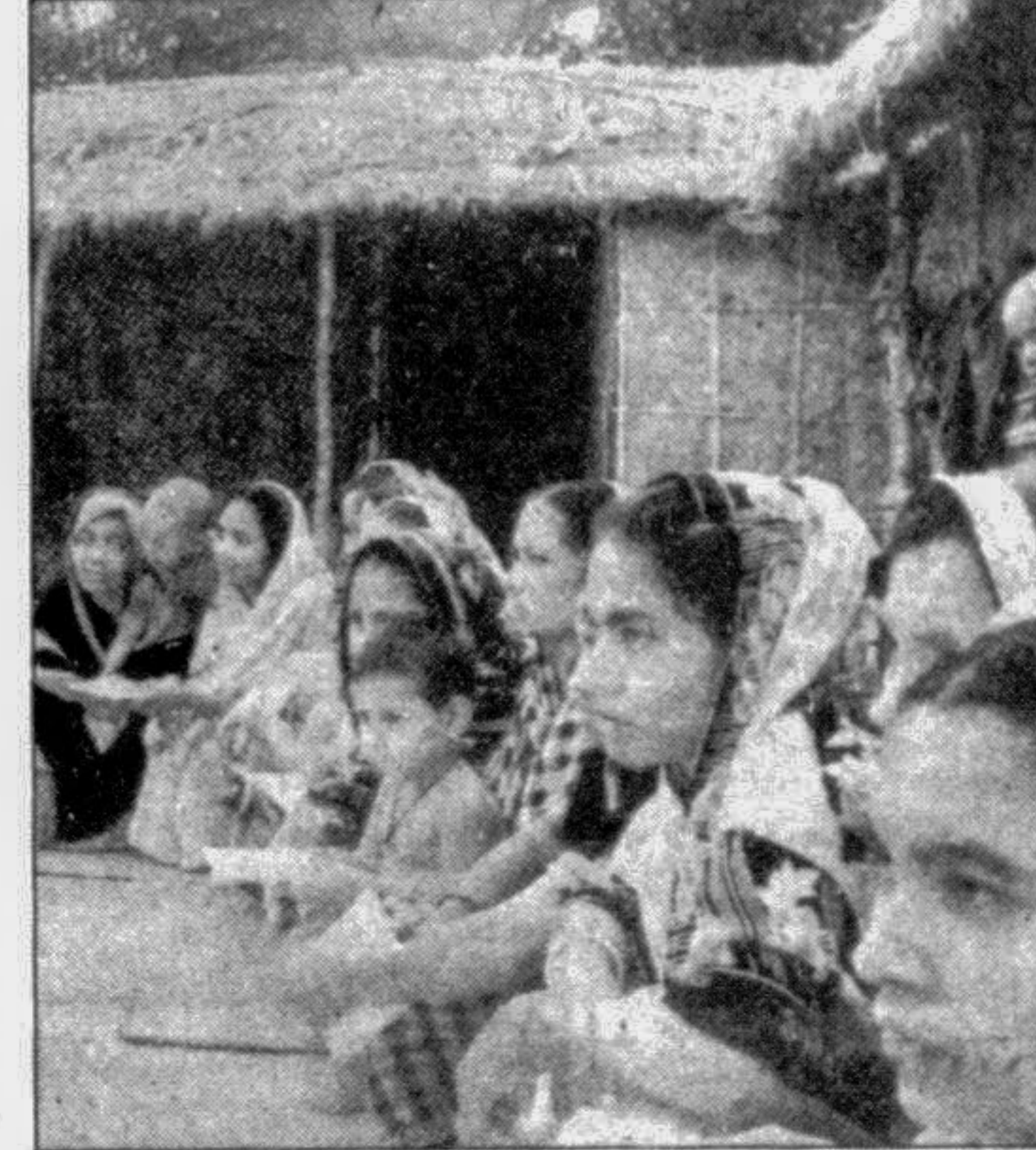
Teacher-student ratios were most unfavourable at the primary school level where there was 1 teacher for every 62 children. The ratio improved at secondary level at 1:29. The annual operating cost was the highest at the university level and lowest at primary level. Gender disparity of public expenditure increased at higher levels of education. The number of female

By Shamim Hamid

teachers for every male teacher showed little improvement in the period 1981-86 at the primary or secondary levels but doubled at the tertiary level indicating a preference of higher educated women to join the teaching profession.

Neither the GOB's quota of 15% of the jobs in staff ranks nor its policy of reserving 50% of the primary school teachers posts for women has been achieved. According to 1986 estimates only 8% of the staff employed by the different departments, directorates and boards under the Ministry of Education were women. In the highest employee category female representation was as low as 6.9%.

One of the problems of fulfilling quotas is that most of the surplus educated female labour force has completed only high school or less, qualifications insufficient for recruitment purposes. Other



problems include attitude biases which discourage women from travelling or living away from home. This is further exacerbated by the lack of adequate living accommodations for women in distant locations, and inadequate attention paid to ensuring physical security for women. Lack of child care facilities to replace traditional family support system is also a disincentive for women to accept positions away from home. A combination of such factors frequently result in women forgoing promotion prospects in their careers in order to maintain family harmony — a feature common in other sectors as well.

Female education is constrained by several factors such as limited enabling environment related to inadequate incentives, dependence of society on child labour, and negative attitudes of society. Other factors include inappropriate curriculum, unbalanced gender

The Role of Government in WID Issues

Since Liberation the GOB has on and off focussed on women's issues although usually in a very limited way. It was only in developing the

composition of teachers and other staff, poor training and motivation, inadequate physical facilities and inconvenient class schedules.

Girls are particularly affected by social attitudes that marriage is the only conceivable goal for women for which education is not only not necessary but may also be counterproductive as it breeds independence and assertiveness, qualities not sought for in an ideal wife. An educated girl can also become a liability as she will require a more highly educated man who may demand a higher dowry.

The major problem faced by the Ministry of Women's Affairs is the continuous shift in its status between being an independent Ministry and being a part of the Ministry of Social Welfare. At present the Ministry of Women's Affairs is an independent Ministry having under it the Department of Women's Affairs. This frequent change in its status undermines the importance of the Ministry and the seriousness of its role in the Government machinery.

While the Ministry of Women's Affairs is the decision making body it implements its projects and programmes through the Department of Women's Affairs. There are about a dozen ongoing projects at present covering among others rural development, population control and family planning, socio-economic development of women and a Women's Support Centre. Besides these projects which are funded by donor agencies the department implements projects funded from the GOB Revenue Budget. These include district level Day Care Centres for children of poor working women, 158 Vocational Training Centres for women and three hostels for working women in Rajshahi, Chittagong and Khulna which are now operating on a self-sufficient basis and do not require funds from the Government. Revenue funds are also used to provide annual grants to women's voluntary organisations involved in social work, for providing the services of an employment exchange for women and for providing legal support to poor women.

Fourth Five Year Plan (FFYP) (1990-1995) that a major departure was made in WID planning compared to the previous three plans. In the FFYP WID was taken as a multisectoral issue and budgetary allocations increased by 10% to comprise 0.22% of the total budget from 0.02% in the second and Third Five Year Plans. This change in approach for the integration of women in the development process was brought about partly by the GOB's own interest and partly by initiatives taken by NGOs, women activist groups, and the Local Consultative Sub-Group on WID.

While this was major step in the history of planning in Bangladesh there was a strong dichotomy between the stated objectives and the WID strategies for achieving gender equity. Women's involvement was given cognizance in almost all the sectors but their significant role in major policy objectives such as poverty alle-

viation, domestic resource mobilisation and self-reliance were not clearly defined. The gap between the Plan rhetoric and WID conceptualisation was amply manifest even in the cases where targets were set. For example, the GOB goals in the FFYP is to double literacy rates from the current 30% to 60% by 1995. This was to be achieved by doubling female rates from 20% to 40% and male rates from 40% to 80%. What the planners failed to take note of was that aiming for an equal growth rate for both sexes would do nothing to reduce gender disparity since female literacy rate in the base year was half that of males.

The institutions primarily responsible for promoting greater participation of women in development activities are the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Planning.

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Conclusion

Evidence and experience thus shows that to bring about significant and lasting change in the situation of women in Bangladesh two basic strategies should be addressed. These are (1) providing women access to power through access to material resources and (2) changing ingrained attitudinal biases of both men and women towards women's role in the productive and the reproductive system of the nation.

Changing attitudinal biases

is a very long term objective and policy planners aiming to achieve this goal should not be seeking quick and immediate impacts from such policies. This is however not to say that this should prove a deterrent because the changing of attitudes is crucial to bringing about any meaningful improvement in the life of women in Bangladesh and policy planners must take this fact into cognizance. One of the ways to approach this from the very basics is through text books and curricula which project the role of women in the productive and reproductive spheres so that both girls and boys can see their roles in society in the proper perspective.

Giving women access to material resources on the other hand involves policies that can not only have immediate impact but will yield tangible results in a relatively shorter time. By material resources here is meant health facilities, education and economic resources. While some action has been taken in the areas of health and education it is still far from sufficient and policies lack the understanding and conceptualisation of WID issues as discussed earlier. An increase in health and education will go towards increasing women's access to economic resources, one of the ways being through enabling them to compete for more productive jobs.

However while GOB rhetoric does talk about including women in the 'development process' it is hampered by lack of data in crucial areas on which it can base its policies. In recent years the BBS has made efforts to collect gender disaggregated data but much needs to be done in this area. For example gender disaggregated data is needed in employment trends in the household and monthly income contributed by earners to name a few.

Again the System of National Accounts (and this is not limited to Bangladesh only) does not take into account the importance of household production where women have a major role to play. This 'invisible' sector supports the more visible economy and helps maintain wages at very low levels especially for women. It is essential therefore to show how the household sector contributes to the national economy. In doing this it is also essential to show who contributes what and by how much so that policy makers have a clear picture of the contribution of women, men and children to the national income. This will highlight the need to invest in human resources, in particular women, who while playing a major supportive role in the economy are bypassed as having very low productivity and not worthy of competing in the job market with men.

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Bengalee Woman Makes Her Mark in BBC

By Rahat Fahmida

In her 50s, she is the first South Asian woman to be a governor of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) governing body. A Bangladeshi lady, Shawar Sadeq left for her higher education for England in 1964, after completing her Bachelors in Physics from Dhaka University. The number of Bangladeshi immigrants has been increasing over the years. But there are just a handful who make a mark like Sadeq.

She recently visited her homeland not on a holiday, but as a part of a high level team, among other things to introduce BBC's new seasonal programme on South Asia — Spotlight on South Asia. She said, "I am proud to be a daughter of Bangladesh."

Sadeq was appointed a governor of BBC in May 1990. It has already been three years and the appointment is for five years. She has three more years to go. In an interview with The Daily Star she talked about her work before joining BBC. "I was researching on computer aid and manufacturing. And apart from that, I did quite a lot of social work, in my local hospital, which is a large teaching hospital. I also worked within the community. I taught for ten years in a secondary school. Later, I was a commissioner for the Commission of Racial Equality," said Shawar Sadeq. She was known around for her work in these fields, regarding which she attended various meetings, seminars, and conferences.

As a member of the board of governors, Sadeq, like her

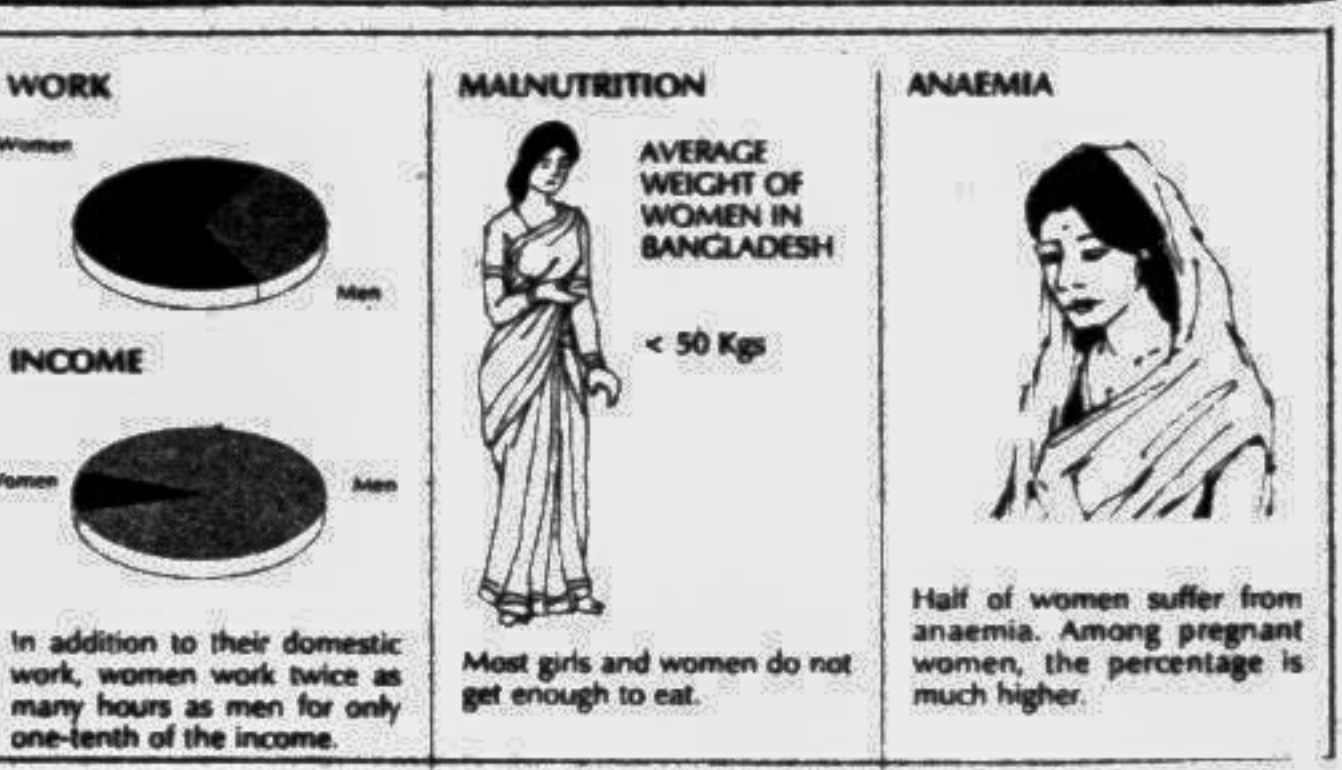


Shawar Sadeq in Dhaka

other colleagues is not involved with the programmes directly. Explaining her work she said, "Well sometime ago one of our ex-chairman of the board of governors explained it beautifully. When someone asked him, 'what do the governors do?' he said, 'Board of governors are the map readers, they read the map and the board of management do the driving.' So you see how crucial it is — if you imagine the BBC to be the car to get somewhere, you have to have the map reader who is got to be good. And the driver who is got to be equally talented."

"So, I think, it is an appropriate description. The governors do not perform the day to day management — in other words, they do not do the driving. They set the plans. In other words, they plan in which way to go, which is the correct route. So, basically it is to make sure that the charter remit is being maintained and correct route is being taken."

The new programme, Spotlight on South Asia, is not only for the Asians to enjoy the diversity and fragrance of their culture. But just as importantly, the rest of the world would share the experiences.



CUSTODY OF THE CHILDREN

Q: "Auntie why are you crying?"

A: "First My husband kicked me out. Now he wants to take my baby from me."

Q: "Of course not. According to Islamic Law, the mother keeps the son till he is seven and the daughter till she reaches puberty. And the father has to financially support his children."

A: "That's right... but they may take a little infant away from its mother?"

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A VILLAGE WOMEN

Boishakh	15th April to 14th May	• bring soil from pond; plant and water vegetables • weed; make trellis for vegetables • make <i>mourabba</i> (mango dessert) and <i>achar</i> .
Joistho	15th May to 14th June	• make <i>am shotho</i> (mango preserve) • vegetable cultivation
Asharh	15th June to 14th July	• make fish traps, nets, breed fish • make <i>karutha</i> (quilt), mattresses and clothes • make <i>shikka</i> (jute hanging baskets)
Srabon	15th July to 14th August	• thresh, dry, clean, parboil and husk rice • dry and stack paddy stalks for cattle • make <i>shital pati</i> (grass mats)
Bhadro	15th August to 14th September	• soak, wash and clean jute • husk rice
Ashwin	15th September to 14th October	• clean house of damp & mould following monsoon • dry, mend rice containers for next harvest • make jute handicrafts
Kartik	15th October to 14th November	• visit family • cultivate vegetable and pulses
Ograhayan	15th November to 14th December	• husk rice and store • make <i>pitha</i> (pies)
Poush	15th December to January	• make rice cakes from newly harvested rice • make <i>cheera</i> (dried rice) and <i>muri</i> (puffed rice) • make <i>gur</i> (molasses)
Magh	15th January to 14th February	• make <i>gur</i> from date palm juice • make rice cakes
Falgun	15th February to 14th March	• repair and re-plaster house and floor • plant vegetables and pick mustard seeds
Chaitro	15th March to 14th April	• clean and repair house • plant vegetables • make palm-leaf fans

Source: Adapted from The Life of a Village Woman, Bangladesh, UNICEF, 1989.

Diary of a Working Mother

By Shaheen Anam

The other day I walked into the room of my colleague and heard her giving instructions to the cook on making samosas. Now, anybody who has made them will know that this is not an easy instruction to give over the phone. Not only that, she was also giving ten other instructions which were totally confusing the poor cook. "What are you doing?" I asked in amazement. She had to give an iftar party and her guests who were leaving soon had no other date except today. I am sure many of you are able to relate to the above story. Today's working mothers are modern and professional and yet they do not want to give up some of their traditional roles. They enjoy being hostess to their family and friends even if it means back breaking work after a hard day at the office or making samosas over the phone!

By Shaheen Anam

her children unhappy on Eid day.

While we are the topic of Eid and shopping, what is everybody doing about giving gifts to the extended family members? This has become a custom in many families and is not a bad one I will admit. The problem is getting something appropriate, within a certain budget and one which fits. Now this is a problem I have often faced and one which has totally frustrated me. Getting clothes for children is especially hazardous as they grow so quickly. It wouldn't be so bad if parents of those children could take it sportingly. But no, some parents, specially mothers will give such looks that you will have to rush back and get a different size. Working mothers just have one or two days off during the week, specially those who work in offices. Sometimes I feel that this is not very well appreciated. The time constraint that working mothers have to work under is a constant source of tension for them. If something does not get done during the weekend then it has to be postponed for the entire week. If for some reason it cannot be postponed than poor mother has to do it during the week which means literally breaking her back.