



WOMEN ON THE MOVE

THIRD WORLD FEMINISM: AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM FOR DEVELOPMENT

by Najma Siddiqi

This is Part I of a two-part article. The second part will be printed in the next issue of this feature page.

THE term feminism, in general South Asian societies, has rather negative connotations. Feminism is seen — by some women as well as most men — as an elitist, Western movement that is potentially threatening to the values of the 'East'. It is, therefore, something less than desirable. Feminism, it is often assumed is just another term for hating men for a radical separatist society in which men have no place. Thus, we find many women who actively fight against the oppression of women or who have fought a male-dominated system to reach a high political or administrative position, anxious to make sure they are not labelled feminists. The categorical way which 'feminism' is denied implies that it is not good to be feminist.

The intention of this paper is to clarify some basic issues about feminism and argue its relevance to Third World development issues. Thus, I will formulate a theoretical framework of feminist ideology which will be relatively more meaningful in the Third World context. This will be done keeping in mind that planners in these countries are finally trying to integrate women in each and every field of development. The need to integrate women's issues in development, however, only received sustained attention after the UN Decade for Women Conference in 1985 held in Nairobi. I will not go into the reasons behind the poor condition of women in South Asian countries but I will try to outline possible strategies that can be developed and implemented for the countries of the Indian subcontinent, which have similar material and ideological conditions. I will do so by drawing on (western) feminist theories, selecting some ideas and rejecting others, depending on their relevance and applicability.

The History of Feminism
In the last few decades, women in North America and Europe have attempted to develop a systematic body of ideas which would explain what they assumed was the universal subordination of women. One of the fundamental questions of the various feminist theories that were proposed was on the origin of the deplorable status of women everywhere. By discovering the origins of subordination, feminists thought they would be able to understand how this situation continued to persist, and, therefore, what could be done to emancipate women from oppression and injustice. Over time and keeping in line with experiences, various feminist theories were proposed, altered, rejected or refined, pointing out the inadequacies of the predecessor theories. Thus we see the gradual development of different kinds of feminisms viz. Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Radical Feminism, etc. Despite the many labels, the basic underlying idea or concept of feminism is that it stands for the total emancipation of women from domination. Feminism believes in an egalitarian society where men and women will enjoy equal opportunity in every aspect of their lives. The differences between feminists thus tend to have

more to do with strategy and method than in ultimate aim. As will be indicated in this paper, differences arise because different groups have different perceptions of how and by whom women are oppressed.

To get a better picture of feminism we will now discuss in brief the different kinds of feminist ideology that have been advocated and discarded by western feminists at various stages.

Liberal Feminism was the earliest view that attracted

sumed by the broader idea of class struggle. The Radical Feminists, taking a somewhat separatist stand, claimed that the root cause of women's exploitation is biological. It is the reproductive role of women that makes them weak and dependent; therefore, without changing basic biological features, emancipation was not possible. This implied that only a revolution in biotechnology would change women's condition.

Taking a less radical stand

women, as Robin Morgan claim. Women are divided by class, by race, by geography and history. Therefore, it makes more sense if we work towards developing a more culturally specific theory of feminism for distinctly separate groups of women with separate characteristics and experiences.

A key concept that has been popularised by Western feminist theory is that of empowerment of oppressed groups, especially through consciousness-raising, of making women aware of the roots of their exploitation and the potential power they have to change their situation. The change in mindset that empowerment brings is a key issue to which we will return.

The Third World Perspective

In Asian Third World countries, the conditions of living for most women are very different from those of most women in the West. Women here have to deal with different sets of problems, having had a different political and socio-economic structure — especially as a result of a long history of colonisation. The most predominant problem for most women is usually endemic poverty as opposed to the need to discover and express oneself freely (a prominent goal of Western feminists). In addition to this, traditions and customs play a dominant role in determining social and sexual relations in these countries.

However, this is not to imply that feminist thought is inappropriate in this context. Women in the Third World do not necessarily lack (and therefore must be taught) the awareness and knowledge of the causes behind the exploitation of women and the rights that they have. Despite the common perception of women as being completely passive and submissive in developing countries, if we look at the history of South Asia itself, we can find many instances of women organising together to fight for their rights — from the Tebhaga Movement of Bengal to the Chipko Movement in India. There are no doubt many more examples of resistance by women which are not recorded, which were not successful — not for lack of trying but because the women have so little power to begin with.

These movements are rarely expressed in terms of Western feminism, nor do they need to be so. They don't use the same vocabulary or have the same vision. These women also dream of a society devoid of exploitation by the male members with whom they have to share their lives. But they are fighting for very different things. What they have in common with Western feminists is the desire to be emancipated from all kinds of oppression, not just from male exploitation. In the words of Gloria Joseph, "When Third World women struggle against their own oppression, they also struggle against oppression in general. They are more concerned with strategies for change than with theories about the origin of the basic division of dominance and submission. This is not to say that they are not concerned about or familiar with their past."

This is precisely what femi-

nism is about. It is not just about labels — who is radical and who is liberal. The following quotation from Kamala Bhasin (of India) and Nighat Said Khan (of Pakistan) makes this clear. "A broad definition of feminism for us today is an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation". According to this definition, anyone who recognises the existence of

Liberal Feminism was the earliest view that attracted women who were seeking ways to change a male dominated unjust society. According to this group, liberation for women is possible through legal reform; existing sexual inequalities can largely be corrected through legislative reform.

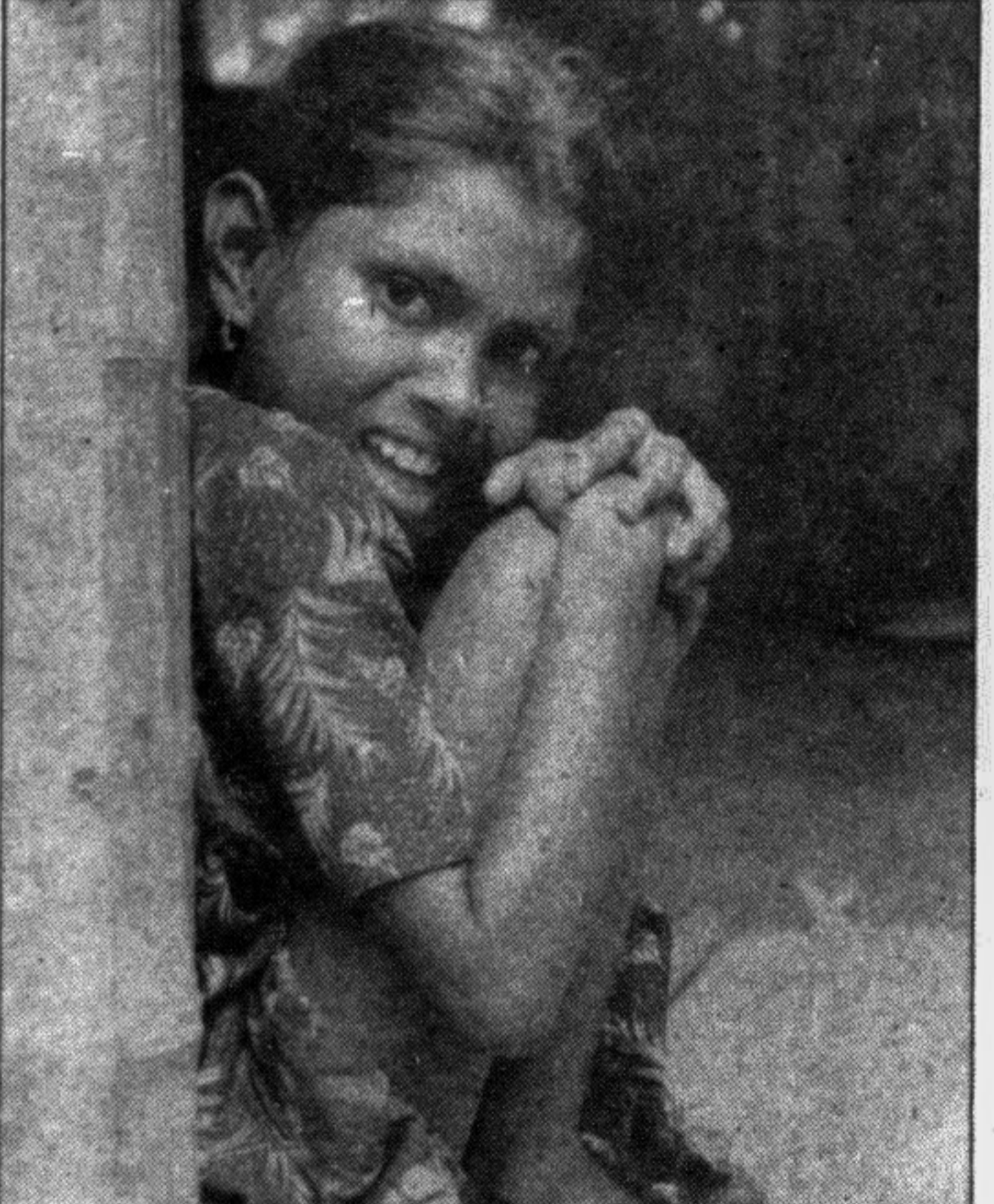
sexism, male domination and patriarchy and who take some action against it is a feminist. In its essence then, present day feminism in South Asia is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home. In short, feminism is not about hating men, or living in a world without men, but about changing the conditions of women's lives for the better.

This objective has everything to do with the people of the developing world. It is the contents of feminist ideology that differ across cultures and countries not the underlying objective. Thus, one must be careful not to import wholesale feminist ideology that has evolved in the West, if we want to popularise a feminist movement in South Asia. Our needs and concerns are very different from theirs. For instance, a current struggle of the US feminist movement is for gay rights and abortion rights. These are not critical issues relating to the everyday lives of most South Asian women today.

At present, we hardly see, especially in Bangladesh, too many organised movements to push forward women's rights. Certainly, there are some urban-based educated women who are attempting to focus on the need to devetifmise women. However, these groups are usually too small and too scattered and sometimes too apolitical to have any large scale impact on most women. In addition most women — because they have so little access to power and so few realistic avenues for change remain resigned about their conditions.

One irony of the situation is that most South Asian countries have at one time or another had a woman as the head of state or government. At the same time, most have recently enacted laws which provide a greater degree of equality between men and women than many developed nations. However, the failure of liberal feminism is made clear by the fact that, in practice, patriarchal attitudes and actions favouring patriarchy persist conspicuously.

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Feminism remains an alien concept to scores of women like her

women who were seeking ways to change a male dominated unjust society. According to this group, liberation for women is possible through legal reform; existing sexual inequalities can largely be corrected through legislative reform. In other words, they are not in favour of changing the overall socio-economic structure of society. It is the law, not structures of ideas that need to be changed.

This line of thought was strongly citizen by Marxist Feminists who found these ideologies and strategies grossly inadequate and safely apolitical and a historical. Marxist feminists, following Engels, claim that the exploitation and oppression of women is historically rooted in the institution of private property which is the cornerstone of capitalism. Women have been systematically deprived of ownership of property have been relegated to the domestic sphere and so are treated by men as only the reproductive agents of society. Therefore, the main tool of Marxist Feminists is class struggle and revolution which will bring about new production relations and emancipation for women.

However, both Radical Feminists and Socialist Feminists reacted to the overarching importance given to class struggle. They both argued that Marxist Feminism would not be able to emancipate women in the real sense because the idea of women being oppressed by men and sexual discrimination is sub-

and elaborating on the Marxist theorists. Socialist Feminists too argued that women could not be emancipated from the clutches of male oppression unless capitalist socio-economic structures are destroyed and at the same time one makes sure that women's issues are not subsumed in the class struggle. However, Socialist Feminists, unlike the Marxists, claim that although capitalism intensifies some forms of patriarchy, the latter is separate from capitalism and must be attacked separately.

Having gone through some of these theories and their individual standpoints, I would stress that the philosophical foundation of a Third World feminist ideology and the selection of relevant strategies must be based on the experiences of the society for which the ideology is meant. It is true that legal reform economic, restructuring and redefinition of biological rights and needs are important factors in changing women's conditions in certain contexts. But what the formulations of feminism stated above have in common, that is not acceptable, is that they all implicitly assume that their (white, middle class) experience of what it is like to be a woman applies to all women everywhere. This implies that the nature of oppression of women is the same everywhere and that gender discrimination is at the root of all of women's miseries. We know that this is not true. There is no automatic 'sisterhood' of

warm hearted people have their jobs during the sunlight. Mrs Sandra Kabir and Mrs Fiona Duby invited the important personalities and arranged a lecture on the helpless victims of the socio-economic structure and I spent hours on facts and figures & dates. Lecture on my daughters was a success.

Listeners enriched their note books. Fiona appeared in the middle of the lecture wearing a bright red shirt and black skirt. Fiona tried to motivate the NGO people and others. Veteran lawyer Mrs. Sigma Huda, Mr Nawshad Faiz, the economist, lawyer Salma Ali and her group of lawyers, all are trying to make an educational house for my daughters who have no home at all.

We all have read the unique story of the rabbit and tortoise in our childhood. My race with the victims, started at 1971 and we are in 1993, — yes I hope the rabbit is in deep slumber. But when is one to

reach the goal. Don't you, the readers think this race of Bangladesh is too slow?

Once I went to president Ziaur Rahman. The noted novelist Rizia Rahman accompanied me.

"I shall help you start" — she told me. And the kind-hearted Head of the State ordered the ministers to start a "home" — with me as a director. (The then Brigadier Sadeque was present there). Professor Badruddoza tried his best to help Rizia and me. He was sincere in his effort. My daughters are my life blood. I do not want that they should be filled and hanged and die by the streetside.

I want to open the door of education and ensure a bright future for them.

On behalf of my offsprings — Noorjahan, and Shab Mcher and Bipa and Shefali I appeal to my countrymen to let me start a "home".

Diary of a Working Mother

By Shaheen Anam

SO it is back to work for everyone including working mothers. The Eid holiday was a nice break and I am sure everyone enjoyed a relaxed time with their families. There was a chorus of protest from a group of working mothers when I mentioned the word "relaxed". According to them it was just the opposite of relaxed. Here are some of the ways working mothers celebrated Eid.

Selina: She is a mother of three children aged between 11 and 5. She works in a bank which is very demanding, but she enjoys it. Selina took the week off for Eid in order to enjoy a "relaxed" time with her family. First, of course was the Eid shopping which continued till the last day or evening to be precise. Invariably something such as a pair of socks or a ribbon was missing and she ventured out in a rickshaw at 10:30 pm to Gausia. Never mind the hassle; children must have every wish satisfied.

Next was the 'kacha bazaar'. With the price of a medium sized chicken going up to 90 taka everything was an aggravation. Selina had to cook till 12 am the night before, because neither the children nor her husband can eat food cooked by servants on Eid. The next day she had to get up at 6 am. The men folk had to take a bath and get ready for the namaz. Who else but Selina should be responsible for sending them on time which meant getting the hot water, finding the 'toup', stringing the pyjama. After they left the remaining snacks were pre-

pared. Getting the girls ready proved to be an even bigger problem. They of course could not find the matching clip. One had the bow of her dress sewn upside down by the tailor

It seems the role of women during these traditional festivals is finally being recognized by the husbands, children and the extended family. I heard one such husband comment that if women are by any chance removed from all households during Eid than there would be no celebration, no festivity. Come to think of it. All mothers, whether they work at home or at the office, put in a great effort so that the family may have the best possible Eid. For them, the meaning of Eid is to see their children in new clothes looking happy. The bonus comes when husbands and other family members appreciate their efforts. That is, as they say, the icing on the cake.

etc. etc. Finally everyone was ready except Selina. Just as she was about to go for her bath, the bell rang. Her first Eid Guests had come to visit!

Ruksana: Is a mother of two

children and she teaches in a school. As teachers have more days off than other professionals I thought atleast this working mother must have passed a "relaxed" time with her family. "Not on your life" she screamed. Ruksana's family might be small, but extended family is not. Counting all her brothers and sisters, their children and all her in-laws, there are about 35 members. Not only had she promised to give gifts to everyone but she had even invited them for the main Eid lunch. For her, she said Eid was one big shopping, traffic jams, cooking, more shopping and more traffic jams. Not that she was not amply rewarded for her efforts. Her husband surprised her with a gorgeous sari and her children wrote a poem for her which read that Eid was so wonderful because mummy was so kind.

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Major areas of concern in the situation of the Bangladeshi woman highlights her disadvantaged position

Fertility
The total-fertility rate has declined from 7.5 births in the late 1970s to 4.9 births in 1988. However, fertility aspirations indicate a preference for 2-3 children. Son preference exists, but not in unlimited numbers.

Mortality
Main causes of mortality among women are related to

her reproductive role, namely too early and too frequent pregnancies. The maternal mortality rate is about six per 1000 live births in Bangladesh as compared to less than one per 1000 live births in Sri Lanka. This represents some 28,000 maternal-related deaths every year.

Marriage
Almost all women marry in

Bangladesh. The average age at marriage for men is 25 whereas the average age for women is 18 years. However, marriages end quite early due to the wide age differences between husband and wife, on an average of 7.5 years according to the Bangladesh Fertility Survey, 1990. Among women age 40-44, 17.4% are widowed, divorced or separated.

Counting economically active women

It is not easy in a population census or household survey to decide whether a person is working or not and what people are working at, particularly women in developing regions. Statistical definitions, the language used, the order of questions and the time-reference period all affect responses to inquiries concerning economic activity.

Terms such as employment, job, work and main activity mean different things to different people. Unless respondents are given clear examples of work that encompasses what women do as well as men, women may define themselves as not economically active when in fact they are. In Chile, for example, an interviewer found that many women defined planting and harvesting as homemaking rather than agricultural work.

Interviewers also contribute to bias when they assume that women or children are not economically active.

Defining economic activity

Many ambiguities arise in applying the concept of economic activity, especially where it relates to activities on the borderline between subsistence production and housework. Where does non-economic housework end and economic activity begin? Although household food and other subsistence production and processing (but not unpaid housework) and work in the informal sector are included in the international definition in principle, many countries omit such activities as gathering fuel or water, processing crops, raising a few animals, keeping a kitchen garden or managing small household-based industries and trading.

The 1982 definition of unpaid family workers reduces the work-time criterion from one-third of "normal working time" to the same minimum time used to define other workers (commonly one hour per week) but added a new stipulation: counting persons who produce solely for household consumption as economically active only if such production is an "important contribution" to the total consumption of the household. Such a contribution must be carefully defined so that interviewers do not assume—once again—that women's work is not important.

Asking questions about work

Many census and survey questionnaires begin by asking "What is your main activity?" or "What is your primary occupation?" This approach is inadequate for most women. Men usually state their economic occupation. Women are likely to say they are housewives, even

if they also produce for the market or produce food for their household. They may think their domestic housework takes more time or is more significant. If the interviewer does not include questions beyond housework, women's economic activity may never be counted.

Persons who work for a wage or salary are usually enumerated as economically active regardless of how the questions are phrased. The complications arise as one moves from wage and salary employment to self-employment—especially in the informal sector—and to unpaid labour in a family farm or business; that is, from more male-dominated to more female-dominated forms of economic activity.

For example, a methodological survey in India designed to test the effect of including different types of activities in the labour force definition found that 13 per cent of adult women were wage or salary earners. When market-oriented production was included—for example, family business, self-employment, crafts and agricultural activities—the figure rose to 32 per cent. When the new ILO standard was fully applied, 88 per cent of women were found to be economically active.

Seasons are very pertinent for rural analyses and also affect many activities in the informal sector and in non-agricultural wage work. Where women's economic activity is less regular than men's, the short reference period will exclude them from being counted in the labour force.

The need for careful interpretation and better measurement

Discrepancies in statistics on economically active women could be cited from a variety of sources for many countries, especially those in which large proportions of the population live in rural areas or are engaged in unpaid family labour or small-scale self-employment. Properly applying improved statistical definitions on women's work is a slow process, however. The present chapter of *The World's Women 1970-1990* relies on available statistics on women's economic activity but looks carefully and critically at national and regional results and at related statistics on time use, where available. Careful review, country-by-country, is necessary for these data to be effectively used and further improved.

*P. M. Garret, "Some structural constraints on the agricultural activities of women: the Chilean hacienda", University of Wisconsin, Research Paper No. 70 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1978).
*N. Anbar, M.E. Khan and R.B. Gupta, "Biases in measuring the labour force: results of a methods survey in Uttar Pradesh, India", International Labour Review (Geneva, International Labour Office, March-April 1987)
Courtesy, United Nations Publication

SPEAK OUT

By Salma Chowdhury

"Cry of a homeless mother"

FIFTEEN girls were sitting in a group on the shadowy Mughal structure. Heavy iron gates bracketed the group casting a timeless cloud over the teen age demands. Two armed guards were protecting the double locked four thousand pound gates. Police officers were on the vigil. On the right side of the arena(?) heavy printed curtain probing the jailor's room while a guarded passage led to the Deputy Inspector General's room. Four musclemen were weighing wheat and 'dal' on a unique 'dari palla' (gigantic weighing machine made by the blacksmiths and carpenters of the jail-prisoners). Every one was serious. So the scene was scene in the arena. One face struck me in the sitting group. "What's your name," I asked. "Jana" — she said boldly. "You are strong, you are smart, why don't you work in a garments factory?" I asked. "They rob 15 days' salary everywhere. I shall not work

there", she replied. "This is your salary" they say and keep 15 days' salary as caution money.

Then the girl goes to her village for good or gets lost in the city "basti" and the money is gone forever. "And we have no time for rest or prayer or for looking after our child or our sick mother", Jana reported. "But why have you come in this disgracing profession? Don't you hate to sleep with a new person every night? Why don't you work in a house?", I asked. "Basha Barhi"? The attractive Jana said with bitterness — "to be raped by 'shahib' or his son." I was dumb with pain in my heart. I have fine bright, and smart daughters. I have 300

(three hundred) million students, bright and smart and honest. All these wonderful young people are thriving towards an excellent future — doctors and architects and journalists and writers, housewives and executives and NGO chiefs. "But what about my daughters — bright and smart and ignorant and honest? With an ocean of honesty and lone and hope dormant in their hearts, what is their future?", I wondered. So I went to Lady Faiz and Liana Farhad and Mr Pole P. Dodge. And they helped me, directed me and I made a project — with Mr Habibur Rahman, the Private Secretary to 'mahila mantri', and his friend Mr Abu Yusuf. We worked at night as. All these