



## Diary Of a Working Mother

by Shaheen Anam

**WORKING** mothers are used to tolerating sexist remarks from colleagues, friends, family etc. The unkindest cut of all was when my four-year old asked me in a shocked voice, the other day, what I was doing with a briefcase in my hand. In the same shocked voice, I asked her what she meant by that. Well, she said, she thought only daddies had briefcases!

Coming from a child, who has always seen her mother work outside the home, convinced me that stereo types about women's roles are so ingrained in everyone that even a little child has a certain perception about it. Our society has yet to come to terms with the fact that women are definitely in the work force and their numbers will only increase with time. Women are constantly subjected to remarks which assume that they are housewives or mothers. Not that there is anything wrong with being mothers and

housewives, but the fact that people just ascribe roles without any consideration is objectionable. I have been subjected to these remarks many times, and I am sure so have you. Once in Bangkok, I was walking in the corridor of the UN building. I had recently joined in one of the UN organizations. A fellow Bangladeshi stopped, and asked me what I was doing there, not only that, he enquired if I had lost my way as my husband's office was not in the same building! Seeing me at a bank someone asked me if I was withdrawing money from my husband's account, or if I had come to take some jewellery out of the locker.

I have often wondered how our friends and colleagues are bringing up their sons so that we can at least hope that our daughters will not be subject to the same stereo typing. In several discussions with women I found that most mothers of sons do not have

any clear thought on this, and do not see it as a problem. Some friends regretfully said that though they try to teach their sons to respect women and educate them to uphold women's rights yet the overall environment is such that their upbringing at home becomes ineffective. A university teacher told me with much regret that her 18 year-old son announced he would never marry a career woman. Recently, I have been noticing with much apprehension that young men seem to be going backwards rather than forwards on this issue. But I hope my perception is wrong. I still have hopes that things will eventually turn for the better for women in our society. The most important thing for women is to get proper education. Only with education will they have the confidence to stand up for their rights, be it at home or at the work place. Nowadays one hears a lot

about marriages breaking up. The common perception is that women are becoming too independent and are not willing to make the adjustments that is required to keep a marriage together. This might be true to some extent, but few people realize that women have always been making all the adjustments and now expect men to come halfway. If marriages are breaking up because of the legitimate demands women are making, than so be it.

This is a sensitive issue and I hesitate to write on it. Our society is in transition where old values are being questioned and new ones are being explored. For better or for worse, women are coming to the forefront of our society, in every sphere, political, professional and social, and will continue to do so. To accept this reality the other half of our society will have to undergo a change in a attitude. Till then women have quite a struggle ahead of them.

## Situation of Women in Bangladesh and Need for Participation in Development Programmes

by M Kabir

**I**n developing countries, both men and women in rural areas have to face the problems of poverty and backwardness. But women have to play more disadvantageous roles. Bangladesh is no exception. In Bangladesh, about half of the population are women and 95 percent of them live in rural area. Rural women are poor and less educated. They have to play vital roles as wife and mother and have to carry out a variety of odd tasks like house keeping, preparing meals, carrying water, collecting fire woods and taking care of children. Since they are not contributing to the family income, they have no say in family decisions. Their position is low in every aspect of family life. Areas of active negligence can be seen in education and in health knowledge reflected in high rates of maternal mortality.

Women's dependence on men within the family and in extended kin group is further reinforced by a symmetrical rules of inheritance of property. While Hindu law does not provide any inheritance to daughters from their parents,

support natal kin, etc. Factors which modify female power relative to men have to do with household decision-making power, control over household and own incomes and the egalitarianism of the husband-wife relationship. There is now

families, either through wage work or through self employment, the institutional supports for such high fertility rates become shaky. A lower desired family size has been revealed for women who are involved in income earning activities with higher use of contraception. Even in urban ar-



Women plucking tea at Srimangal

The current economic situation, however, pushes many rural women to step out of their traditional roles to shoulder more active part in economic activities and development process. The poverty of women has gradually been increasing due to enormous population growth over the last two decades, showing that poor rural women are the most vulnerable group in the world. Poverty is forcing them to work even harder to help run their families. In recent years, women from the poorer sectors have been targeted for aid by various organizations with an intention to helping them to earn so that they can improve their living conditions and their status in the family as well. It has been argued that participation of women in income generating activities upgrades their status in the family and their earnings give them power to have control over their reproductive life.

Muslim law does allow the daughters half the share than that of the sons. In practice, most Muslim women in Bangladesh do not claim such property, particularly land. This serves to maintain good relations with their brothers, on whom they might have to fall back upon in the event of widowhood or divorce. Even if a married woman gets her inherited property, it is usually operated by her husband who thus also controls the income yielded by such property.

evidence from many developing societies, including Bangladesh, where the low status of women has commonly been attributed to their segregation from paid employment and then consequent dependence on men for economic support, that independent income earning carries the possibility of women gaining some control over the use of family income, or at least over their increased participation in decision making. Contribution to family income is invariably accompanied by a higher value within the home as well as a more egalitarian husband-wife relationship, leading to enhancement of women's power relative to men's in the household context.

There is also evidence that independent earning provides women peer support and solidarity with other women in similar situations. Women's increased mobility, particularly in a male dominated society reduces their dependence on male kin as mediators (in hospitals, banks, bazars, assist to visit a relative's house, family planning clinics, etc). Women also gain access to independent sources of knowledge and are exposed to modernizing influences and associations, which may have impact upon their self-perception and status in the family. All these are likely to have a positive impact on women's personal autonomy from individuals who oppose lower fertility and increase the chances of contraceptive use. Recent evidence suggests that among poor rural women who have been driven to seek alternative source of income for their

Initially, women in development activities focussed on bringing about change in family living. Various development strategies were introduced by various agencies. The purpose of the women's participation in development projects is to promote rural women in income generating activities and to disseminate family welfare information.

This is essential because of the prevailing social, cultural and economic conditions in many societies which undermine the contribution of women. Everywhere, women's position in regard to income, education, employment and social prestige is lower than that of men. In Bangladesh, lower status and illiteracy, malnutrition and other factors of poverty affect them more than men. Though about 50 per cent of the population are females, a large number of women is deprived of equal rights of having equal wages. Besides, they can not be mobilized into effective pressure group to fight for their rights and causes. Right from birth the females have to face various problems. Women are lately coming out in large numbers to join the construction activities and the garments industry. In terms of wages, women are paid about half of what their male counterparts get. The existing socio-cultural background is responsible for this discrimination. That women in Bangladesh are generally disadvantaged is amply borne out by statistics and persists at every tier and strata of society. A very small number of women become professionals. Most of the women work as domestic servants, agricultural workers, weavers, labourers, and even as construction hands. Education is often denied or if granted is restricted to just the level needed for using as a bargaining bait for marriage. In spite of the constitutional guarantee that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life and despite the enactment of some legislation, the legal and especially social status of women in Bangladesh is far from being equal. For instance, constitution ensures equal rights to all citizens but that the Muslim inheritance law provides a son the major part of his father's property. In the Hindu inheritance law, a daughter has no right to her father's property. The law also deprives a widow of total rights to her husband's property.

Factors which define female autonomy have been identified as social and cultural practices such as patrilineal residence as well as support exogenous to immediate family unit such as solidarity with other women, access to an independent income, access to an independent source of knowledge,

cas, there are indications that poor, illiterate women who are employed outside the home have lower fertility and much higher rates of contraception use than non-working women from similar background. Reinforced by religion and the law, the inferior position of women relative to men is reflected in socially condoned gender differentials both in public sphere (participation in labor force, access to the market place, health and education facilities, credit services etc), as well as in the private sphere (household decision-making and domestic power sharing). There is also lot of evidence which supports the contention that women of all ages are in disadvantaged situation relative to men in the areas of health, nutrition, education, employment, leisure etc.

A woman's status in society and her reproductive health are intricately related. Reproductive health, particularly the ability to regulate and control fertility has an impact on the status of a woman and vice versa. Fertility regulation enables women to control and take charge of their lives and helps improve a woman's status in society. A woman with no control over her fertility can not complete her education, maintain gainful employment or make independent marital decisions. The employment fertility relationship is also seen to depend upon the domestic status of women and the nature of conjugal relationships. It has been argued that labor force participation of women leads to a more equal husband-wife relationship which in turn, is related to lower fertility.

## Focus on Homeless Women in Safe Custody

by Salma Ali

**ONE** of the most disadvantaged and unfortunate section of female population in Bangladesh are young and homeless girls languishing in safe custody prisons. These girls - mostly in their teens - may not be criminals and nor are they suspected of any crime. The court or other competent authority like police have placed them in safe custody of prison supposedly for their own protection.

6. Those who have been abandoned or lost and have nowhere to go for shelter (Sec 54 of CRPC).

7. Those needing safety as decided by court, police, etc (Sec 54 of CRPC).

8. Those who are witness to grave criminal offences e.g. murder (Sec 302 of BPC).

**Condition In Safe Custody Prisons:** The safe custody prisons are to give not only shelter but protection as well to the girls for as long as the court or police decides. After this period they are released but there is no fixed duration of their safe-custody imprisonment which varies with each individual case and may range from few days to even years. During imprisonment the girls are kept confined with common criminals and are exposed to very unwholesome jail conditions. There are no compartmentalisation of jail inmates and young impressionable girls getting into close contact with older real convicts and veteran criminal are bound to develop criminal tendencies. Most safe-custody cases are not involved in crime and their living with other female convicts will mold their psyche into mental cases. Society has a moral obligation towards them and situation must be corrected so that many unfortunate safe-custody girls do not degenerate in future; Further, keeping them in such condition is a violation of

human rights. There are no published statistics on the number of safe custody girls but jail authorities estimated that about 1600 girls have been in different safe-custody prisons during last 5 years. These prisons are situated at Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi and other district jails. Roughly about 325 girls were put into safe custody each year throughout Bangladesh. High rate of migration to urban areas like Dhaka and larger cities/towns from villages in search of jobs and better living means that there will be significant increase in the number of safe-custody girls by the end of 1995. Swift annual population growth rate of 2.5% will also contribute to higher number of safe-custody girls. Indication from unofficial

sources already put the latest figure to approximately 35 girls every month at Dhaka central jail alone.

The number of such girls are increasing and they deserve constructive attention of our society. Except for Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association and another women organisation named Mohila Parishad, no other organisations are specially involved in taking care of these unfortunate girls. Occasionally the directorate of Social Welfare releases and shelters the girls in its shelter home but the environment at the home is hardly better than the prison. It is the duty of our Government to offer alternative safe protection for girls so as to become productive hands and not burdens to the society and state.



Child labour

— Photo by Basher

## Supporting Safe Motherhood

**★ THE RISKS OF CHILD-BIRTH CAN BE DRAMATICALLY REDUCED BY GOING TO THE NEAREST HEALTH WORKER FOR REGULAR CHECK-UPS DURING PREGNANCY.**

\*Many of the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth can be avoided if the mother-to-be goes to a health centre as soon as she believes she is pregnant. A health worker will help the woman to have a safe birth and a healthy baby by:-

- Checking the progress of the pregnancy so that if problems are likely the woman can be moved to a hospital for the birth
- Checking for high blood

pressure, which is a danger to both mother and child

- Giving tablets to prevent anaemia ('thin blood')
- Giving the two injections which will protect the mother and her newborn baby against tetanus
- Checking that the baby is growing properly
- Giving malaria tablets where necessary
- Preparing the mother for the experience of childbirth and giving advice on breastfeeding and care of the newborn
- Advising on ways delaying the next pregnancy

— Unicef

## SPEAK OUT

**I** have noticed that in response to my complain on the "Speak-Out" column Ms Munira Khan put in a letter to the editor explaining the situation. I must say, yes, I do agree that these inner-wheel clubs have various projects. I am quite well-acquainted with WVA's activities. But what still remains my stressing point is, they ought to come up with programmes to implement women's rights as regards the family law and also at their work place. At every status they are still struggling or rather fighting.

Women's social security was very much at stake as we saw the situation during the recent

Eid shopping. The shopping centres were crowded mostly by people who were wondering around for eve teasing rather than shopping for the family. It is, the situation just worsened during eid. Respect for women in general is missing. And it is a value that has to be woven in from the very beginning. The social attitudes has to change and so does the values. As soon as a girl is born into a family, it is obviously not a 'bad' news; it is rather a relief - majority of the people have to truly accept this. This would certainly be a big step forward. Campaign for this has already started, and it would be stressed and emphasised by various social, non-government organisations and the media.

I wish them best of luck through this column. My best wishes to Ms Munira Khan and hope there are no hard feelings. Ms Nusrat Farida Dhaka



A woman in Kangpur irrigating her fields by the "dheki" system, thus saving fuel



A woman at the potter's wheel. — Photo by Rafiq