

# WOMEN ON THE MOVE

## Of Human Bondage

by Prof Zaheda Ahmad

**I**n independent Bangladesh not a single day goes by without reports of atrocities on and maltreatment of women appearing in the daily press. And yet it can safely be said that what appears in the daily press represents the proverbial tip of the iceberg only. For a variety of reasons much more goes unreported.

If, as is generally accepted, the level of civilization a particular society has attained is judged by the treatment it accords to its women and children then where does Bangladesh stand in the league of nations?

Only the other day, the press reported the brutal

matter of a couple of hundred miles at the most. But in every other respect this village, like thousands of other Bangladeshi villages is much more different from the capital city than is the case, say, in more fortunate countries.

Our villages, to the sure, are inhabited by people who have no other alternatives but to live there. No one does it by choice. Poverty, ignorance, disease, squalor, lawlessness and violence are an inseparable

upon women like Nurjahan while their male fellow travellers, even though accused of the same "offence", usually go scot-free.

And what was the crime? That she had committed adultery? But adultery is not a criminal offence by any definition of the existing laws of the land. Moreover, village "matbars" have no legal authority to sit on judgment on anyone. In any case, to condemn anyone to death by fire for any crime however abominable, is a mediaeval, barbarous form of punishment which we never recognise as part of our cultural inheritance. In fact, we fought our Liberation War to facilitate the establishment of a modern, progressive, equitable, free and fair society where such barbarous, and evil ideas and practices would find no congenial ground.

But sad as it is, after more than two decades of independence, we have not been able to translate those ideals into reality. Not to speak of moving forward, in many respects, we have, so to say, fallen backward. To take just one example, the use of the religious card for ulterior political purposes has come back with a vengeance. All those who for one reason or another subscribe to this model of political behaviour can not be the allies of women in their struggle for emancipation. Here again we must not forget that the fundamentalists as well as the mullahs are enemies no doubt but the real and more powerful enemy of oppressed women as well as of men is the divisive, inequitable social structure which breeds and nurtures them. Also, any meaningful and worthwhile programme of female emancipation must form a part of an integrated plan for the whole underprivileged section of our society. An unjust society which keeps its men in

bondage can not set its women free. It is of the total human bondage that we should think of and plan about for its elimination.

Quite often we talk about some visible signs of so-called progress on the part of women here. Examples come handy — a lady as the head of the government and as the leader of the opposition. This is good as far as it goes but in the ultimate analysis does not mean much in the overall context of female backwardness. How can we forget that they have come to the top not on their own merit but on the basis of that tradition of inheritance set and upheld by the dominant members of a male-dominated society? Even after twenty years of independence we have not yet done away with the system of nomination for female representation in the Jatiya Sangsad. This is all very fine for the ruling party as it works so well in its favour. But it is a testimony, if any more is needed, to the subordinate position even of our educated women. One swallow, as the saying goes, does not make summer. Gender inequity and discrimination is deeply entrenched in all spheres of the socio-economic spectrum. In 1988, the Washington-based Population Crisis Committee prepared a survey report on the position of women in various countries on the basis of a) participation in economic activities, b) position in society c) educational opportunities d) freedom of choice in child bearing and health care. On all these counts, Bangladesh came last on the list.

But that does not mean woman here do not contribute to economic activities. On the contrary, their participation in socio-economic activities ranging from dreary back-breaking domestic chores to many other forms of on-and

off-farm jobs goes not only unrewarded but unrecognised too. Gender gap at all levels of education has not narrowed significantly over the last twenty years though some progress has been made. In private and public sector employment significant progress has been made only in the garments industry, though at the lower level. But here also the record has been marred by gross exploitation of the predominantly female work force.

*Quite often we talk about some visible signs of so-called progress on the part of women here. Examples come handy — a lady as the head of the government and as the leader of the opposition. This is good as far as it goes but in the ultimate analysis does not mean much in the overall context of female backwardness. How can we forget that they have come to the top not on their own merit but on the basis of that tradition of inheritance set and upheld by the dominant members of a male-dominated society? Even after twenty years of independence we have not yet done away with the system of nomination for female representation in the Jatiya Sangsad. This is all very fine for the ruling party as it works so well in its favour.*

Bulk of the professional and working women at the higher levels tends to come from the privileged and enlightened part of the urban social groups. Even so their representation at the policy-and decision-making levels within the government is poor, to say the least.

According to a UN report, based on data for 1987, there was not a single woman policy maker at the legal, social and economic levels in Bangladesh.

Social service departments could boast of less than eight per cent female representation while the Cabinet Division had less than three per cent. Even neighbouring Bhutan had a much better track record.

In a class-ridden exploitative society — no one, male or female — can be in a position to realise his/her full potential. The ruling classes in such a society constitute the state power which is always tilted heavily against the underprivi-

## FACTSHEET

### "Feminised" Poverty

Rural poverty is growing faster than world population, and women are especially hard hit. Of the billion people living below the poverty line in the developing world, nearly 60 per cent are women. Over the past two decades, their numbers have increased by 50 per cent, as compared to a 30 per cent increase for men. In Asia alone, the number of poor rural women has reached 374 million, more than the population of Western Europe.

### Triple Disadvantage

Rural women are triply disadvantaged. As poor they share all the hardships and constraints that men do; as women, they face discrimination and neglect; when they are heads of households, as at least 23 per cent are in the least developed countries and over 30 per cent are in sub-Saharan Africa, they are forced to manage their homes and farms alone. In comparison with rural men, women: have far less access and rights to land; have less access to basic inputs and credit receive between half and three quarters of the wages men receive for the same work; are generally ignored by extension services and research; have less education and higher illiteracy rates; and are more likely to suffer undernutrition.

### Powerful Force

Women are powerful force for development. In addition to being responsible for the home and children, for example they produce at least half the food consumed in the developing world and as much as 80 per cent in Africa. In Latin America, women contribute 50 per cent or more of the income in more than half of all smallholder farming families.

### Land Reform

Lacking access to land ownership and having only limited land use rights, poor rural women often face discrimination in land reform programmes. In Honduras, only 4 per cent who benefit from such programmes are women; in Peru, only 5 per cent; in Colombia, 11 per cent.

### Bank Loans

Worldwide, only 6-11 per cent of all loans go to women; in many areas, the percentage is far less. In some countries, women are considered legal minors and are therefore not eligible for bank loans. In places where women may be eligible for loans, they are bypassed on the false assumption that they are bad risks. Yet, experience shows that credit programmes for rural women can be economically viable, that even small loans can make an enormous difference in productivity — and that women's repayment rates are generally much higher than men's.

### Absolute Necessities

"Sustained, meaningful rural development must include policies and practices that recognise women's vital contribution and support women's domestic and productive roles. This means ensuring... equitable access to productive resources, technologies, credit, markets, and training... If rural women are to realise their full productive potential, they must have adequate access to health services and formal education, sanitation, and safe water supplies. They must also be well represented in decision-making bodies at all levels."

Note: Compiled for 'Women on the Move' from various reports of the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

*And what was the crime? That Nurjahan had committed adultery? But adultery is not a criminal offence by any definition of the existing laws of the land. Moreover, village "matbars" have no legal authority to sit on judgment on anyone. In any case, to condemn anyone to death by fire for any crime however abominable, is a mediaeval, barbarous form of punishment which we never recognise as part of our cultural inheritance. In fact, we fought our Liberation War to facilitate the establishment of a modern, progressive, equitable, free and fair society where such barbarous, and evil ideas and practices would find no congenial ground.*

murder of yet another Nurjahan by the so-called village "matbars" in a remote village of Faridpur district. How far remote and removed is Sreepur from Dhaka — the enlightened capital of Bangladesh? Not every far in absolute geographical terms — a

part of our everyday rural existence. And women there, being the doubly exploited and underprivileged section of the social heap, have to bear most of the brunt of an unequal and oppressive social system. The ugly hands of a ruthlessly brutal society come down heavily

### Women in Authority

## The Ideal and the Reality

by Maria Angelica Ducci

**M**OST of the women in leading positions in government have broken new ground in education, culture, social welfare and women's issues. The areas of activity in which women are most commonly accepted are

actually "extensions" of the traditional roles that, throughout the world, the woman assumes in the family. Public opinion is still surprised by the appointment of a woman to high office, especially so if this happens in

spheres historically associated with supposed "male vocations".

### A Near Absence

Almost everywhere in the world, women have the vote and account for over half of the

electorate. With our rare exception, however, their political activities are restricted to anonymous and informal roles in local communities. They hover at the margins of the higher levels of trade union, political, governmental and corporate life, and of interest groups.

Until 1987, women occupied barely 10 per cent of parliamentary seats, with the Northern and Eastern European countries taking the lead. Recent political restructuring in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union has brought with it a sharp fall in women's representation in those parliaments. The same holds true for the trade unions, despite the fact that women account for nearly one-third of union memberships. Indeed, the women to have reached the leadership of a trade union can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

This pattern of inequality is mirrored, indeed accentuated, in the employers' organizations, where women are practically absent. Everyone knows the situation in professional employment. Women continue to be concentrated in lower-qualified, lower-paid jobs, and very few manage to attain managerial posts, though the trend is on the increase.

There are two types of obstacles to be overcome in order that women can have access to decision-making positions — structural and situational. The former include the infamous differences in levels of education, occupational experience and income levels as compared to men. These combine with and are reinforced by the situational factors such as the burden of family responsibilities, legal, psychological and material dependence on their spouses and male relatives, colleagues or bosses, and the fact that society is not prepared to change its attitudes and support women in assuming positions of responsibility.

The deeply rooted "gender ideology" underlying all this constitutes a system of barriers to the upper echelons. It takes the form of values, attitudes and behavioural patterns which inhibit development and the recognition of the leadership qualities of women and which thus demand additional sacrifices from those who nevertheless strive to overcome them.

It has been estimated that over a women's participation in excess of 30 per cent in the upper echelons would be necessary for any noticeable difference to be made to the nature and tenor of the decisions taken in the areas affected.

So what would this difference be? Women tend to speak with a "different voice" which as a rule lays stress on the social ethos of development, that is to say education, health, children, environment, dialogue and peace. Conversely, men tend to concentrate on the economic aspects such as production, trade, profitability, finance, technology and national defence. If we really aspire to any development of the human lot involving both economic growth and social equity, the best way to achieve this coveted objective will be by having men and women sharing in decision-taking.

## Diary of a Working Mother

by Shaheen Anam

**M**Y secretary, who is a male and has two small children regularly stays back to work after office hours. My colleagues secretary is a woman, also with

a women announces that she is pregnant, down goes all her prestige as a professional person. Whereas nothing has happened to change her efficiency or her commitment.



small children and she does not like staying in the office after 4:30. So what should one normally assume? That women with children are not committed to the profession? or that they are always ready to rush off home? That males make better professionals?

I have written earlier that if women are discriminated in the professional world than women with children who choose to work outside the home are much more discriminated upon. This cuts across country, culture and all boundaries. There is a basic assumption that their minds are always at home with the children and not at work. One can spend 15 minutes chatting with a colleague over a cup of tea, but heaven forbid if a working mother asks permission to go home for 15 minutes to see her baby. As soon as

member of the society. So if we come back to the business of our secretaries. My secretary is a dedicated worker and therefore stays after office hours, but it is also because that while he works outside there is probably his wife who is home to look after his and if this wife works outside the home than she has certainly come back home on time.

There are two issues here. One is, does staying back after office hour on a regular basis makes one more efficient or effective? The other is why should family obligations be considered as an impediment to professionalism. Why should women with families be made to feel unprofessional if after a tough 8 hour day wants to go home. I am of course not talking about special days or about meeting deadlines. On such occasions everyone should be

expected or should work 10 or 12 hours if need be. I am sure few women would hesitate to put in that extra hour if he work so desired.

I do not want to make this into a male female issue. There might be many professional women who do not have small children or a family to take of. These women have the option to work as late as required and those women with families compare poorly with them. I vehemently question this assumption or this comparison. A persons efficiency should not be judged against the number of hours she is putting at her work. Rather, it should be judged for her output and her ability to perform. These comparisons are unfair and women should not be made to feel inferior for not being able to live upto those standards.

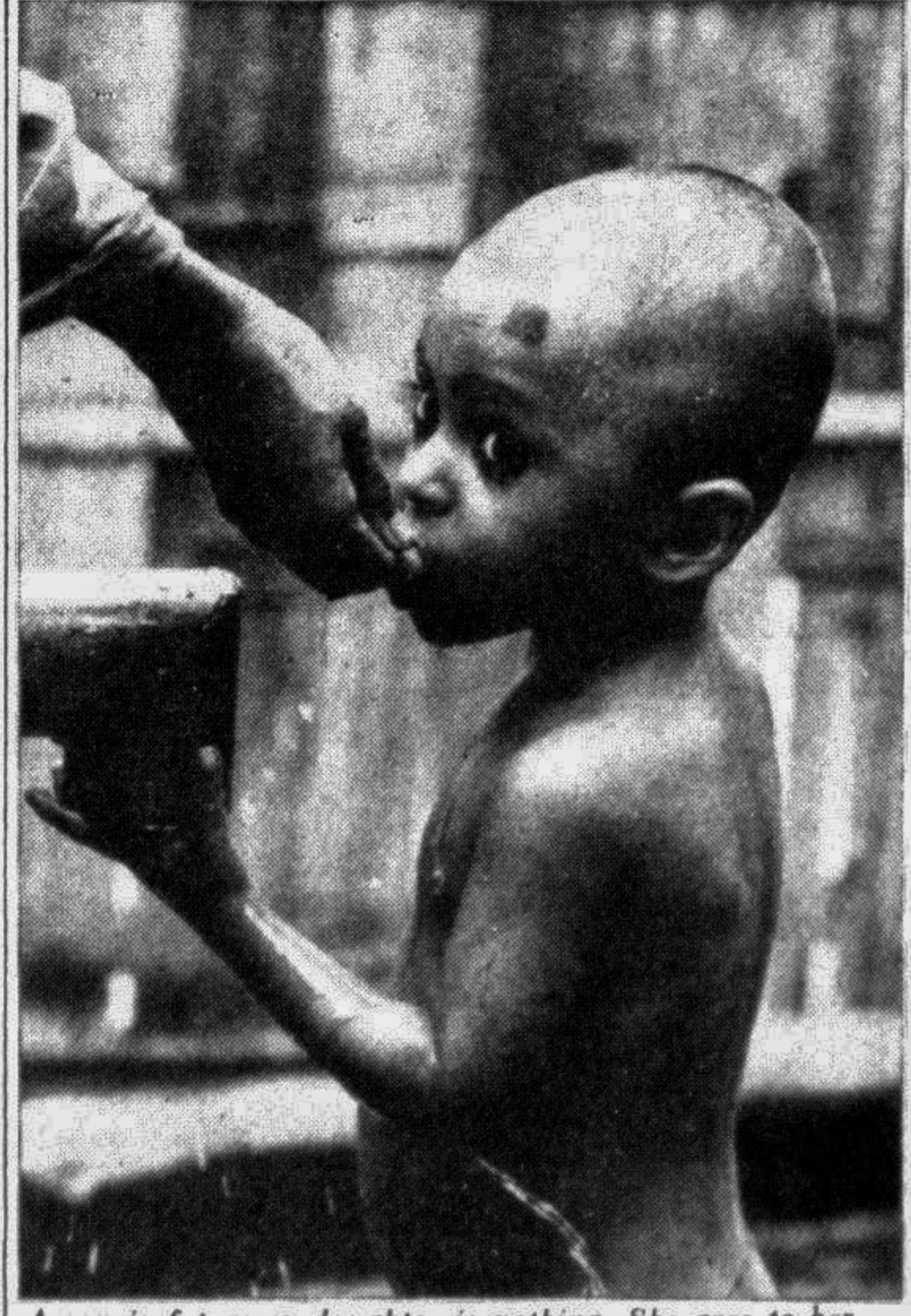
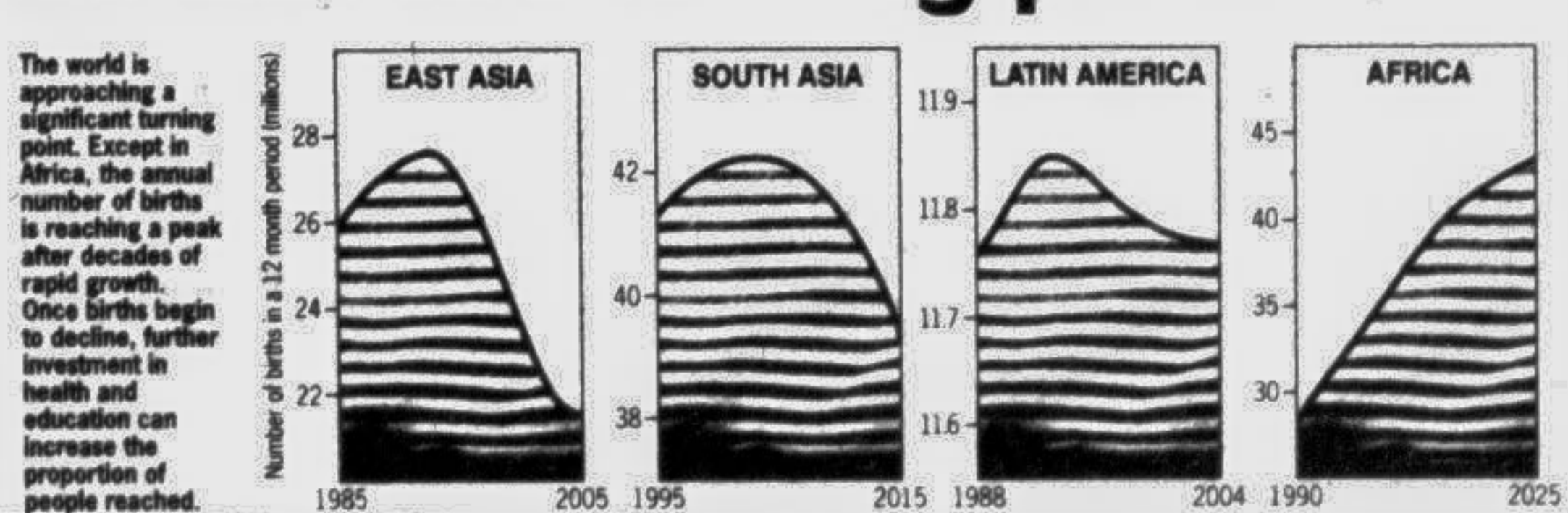
These are issues we gradually have to come to terms with as more and more women join the work force. If we are truly committed to build a just and equal society than our attitudes and assumptions about working women will have to change.



Great Strides!

— Photo Unicef

## Births: the turning point



A son is future, a daughter is nothing. She goes to her husband's home and there is nothing. — Photo Unicef

**Rights and Obstacles**  
There are two types of obstacles to be overcome in order that women can have access to decision-making positions — structural and situational. The former include the infamous differences in levels of education, occupational experience and income levels as compared to men. These combine with and are reinforced by the situational factors such as the burden of family responsibilities, legal, psychological and material dependence on their spouses and male relatives, colleagues or bosses, and the fact that society is not prepared to change its attitudes and support women in assuming positions of responsibility.