



WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

Facts, Claims and Rhetorics

by Zahir Sadeque

CONCERN for gender equality and establishment of female rights has become a major topic of research, dialogue, slogan and discussion over the last few decades. Globally, feminists, social scientists, policy makers and concerned citizens have pointed out the inequality that females in relation to their male counterparts are faced with. This inequality is characterised by lack of access (of the females) to income earning opportunities, education, healthcare and political power.

Social scientists through their research have also exploded the myth of "economically unproductive females." In fact, a critical analysis of the labour force of any society will prove the contrary. Women have always participated in gainful activities, beyond their traditional role model type of household chores. In all societies, their participation in the economically active labour force is increasing, a fact that should be reflected in the national accounting methods, so that female participation in the labour force is properly accounted for. As a result of these studies a new approach in appreciating the role of women in development has emerged. Women in Development (WID), is this new field of study as well as focus of analysis. In Bangladesh, women groups like "Mahila Parishad" and "Women For Women," and pioneer individual researchers like Jahanara Haque, Khaleda Salahuddin, Shamima Islam, and numerous others have researched and raised issues related to female status, inequality and contributions in economic development. Fortunately, few but extremely capable male researchers have also written on gender inequality and status of females in Bangladesh. "Reluctant Debutante" by Dr Golam Murshid (1983) and "Birds in a Cage" by Dr Shapan Adnan (1991) are undoubtedly one of the finest scholarly writings on gender issues and classic examples of male scholarship on women in Bangladesh. Newer women groups like "Nari Pokkho," "Nari Grantho-Probortana" and others have voiced concerns on female inequality and oppression and have also raised policy issues for the betterment of the "Other Half" of our population.

As a response to national and international consciousness about female oppression and inequality, Government of Bangladesh (GOB) has enacted newer policies aimed at protecting the rights and interest of women. International donor agencies have also come forward by increasing their allocation for projects aimed at the development of women.

Despite these flurry of activities, objective situation of women in Bangladesh is yet to improve substantially. For a variety of reasons, including but not limited to the inherent male bias of traditional and patriarchal societies, the condition of women in Bangladesh is far from the ideal.

However, it is my contention here that in WID affairs, claims are often made not in line with the facts but more in a rhetorical fashion, and therefore, WID claims remain unsubstantiated.

The gender disparity is increasingly being articulated by concerned individuals, groups and other entities like the press and our development partners, i.e. donors. This constitute the core fact of the situation of women in Bangladesh and hence the need to pay attention to WID issues. The crux of the argument for WID considerations in all development programmes emanates from the findings and conviction that as a special disadvantaged group, women deserves special assistance provisions in every project, so that they can receive guaranteed proportion of the assistance programme directed towards beneficiaries. Now this, raises the claims issues that I allude to in the title of this article.

Most donor agencies (who provide overwhelming proportion of our developmental resources), have in-house WID specialists or people mandated to look after WID considerations. Within GOB, officers (variably female, consistent with our stereotype ethos) in the research/planning cells of ministries and divisions of the Planning Commission perform WID functions. The function of

officers responsible for WID affairs, is mostly regulatory and statutory. They are the ones to ensure that each project of their respective organization is scrutinised from a WID perspective. They are there also to ensure that no project supported by their agency or government, negatively impacts women, by displacing them from their existing employment or enterprise. Finally, they are involved in instilling gender focus in projects with the view to increase the benefits for women population. This is exactly the place to voice the claims for women and push the WID agenda.

Preferential treatment for women or for that matter any particular group may discriminate against other equally deserving claimants. If this proposition is accepted we shall commit yet another folly to correct the imbalance between the sexes. Furthermore, by committing ourselves to one sex or the other, we shall override the working of the market forces and the secular trends of the economy, and thereby, competitiveness and efficiency will be compromised to cater to special interest group.

However, as rational practitioners of development strategies, any one involved in project design/appraisal and management must look at the issues dispassionately and objectively as well. Claims for any special groups must be made on the basis of arguments that is consistent with the purpose and goal of the overall strategy and particular (project) activity. WID writers and specialist wants every one to acknowledge that women are undervalued in conventional studies and accounting methods.

Accepted. Therefore, to remedy the past errors, we must redouble our efforts to reach the benefits to more women, even if by default, it becomes at the expense of eligible males. Why? For instance, if WID officers or proponents claim that a certain percentage of the benefits of a project has to go to women, then the entire project purpose or objectives may become distorted.

opportunities for the poor to break out of the poverty trap. Even then, accumulated experience suggests that over a considerable period of time such a strategy is not likely to benefit a large number of people or benefit them in such a way that the absolute poor can graduate from their status and thereby forego the benefits offered by such programmes. In targeted programmes, beneficiaries breaking out of the poverty cycle permanently and not reentering the assistance market once again are also rare to find. The results of such WID induced programmes would fare no better, if women are targeted in mandatory manner, as espoused by many WID proponents. Therefore, it is essential that gender targeted programmes should better be confined to exclusively poverty alleviation type projects. This however, in no way implies that gender considerations should be omitted in the (project) design/appraisal

process. On the contrary, they should be vigorously but rationally pursued, so that in doing so, the ultimate project/programme goals are not compromised, and nor are poor men sacrificed to benefit poor women.

However, the complexity of the gender equality and WID issues cannot be exhaustively discussed in simple terms. Nor can the WID agenda be pursued in rhetorical fashion. This is where the Rhetorics part of the title comes to the forefront.

WID literature in recent times seems to be increasing at a consistent pace. Even popular (newspaper) articles like this one, are also increasingly visible. However, too often we find much of this is devoid of critical analysis and are extremely partisan in nature. While no one in their right mind refuses to accept that there is marked disparity between the sexes, the proposed mitigation is what puts many of us at odds with the prescriptions of leading WID spokesperson. Frequently, we read features, commentaries and articles on Women's role in this and that, how a particular programme is affecting women (Farida Akhter, Holiday May 28, 1993) or how contribution of women in certain activity is ignored (Khushi Kabir, the Morning Sun May 31, 1993). The referenced articles are only symbolic, because they are recent, and I happened to read them. But the point I want to make, is that even in these articles written by two of the most visible and certainly leading spokesperson of gender issues, there is clearly a preference for claims that is not analytically established. Statements have been made in these two referenced articles about coercions, forcing women to participate in population control activities and contributions of women in resource management. But such claims fail to prove uniqueness of women in suffering deprivation or as resource managers. Poor men are sufferers of myriad exploitative trends as well.

Men also contribute in resource management to say the least. There are also numerous misconceptions like homestead is for women, small ruminants and poultry are owned and managed by women, so on and so forth. Men are very much part of managing homesteads as well as small ruminants, poultry. Usually, owning and managing productive resources are a family affair. Therefore, segregating men and women in these activities is unnecessary and developing policy options on that basis may be erroneous. Therefore, unsubstantiated and repetitive statements will not achieve the intended objectives. Rhetorical pronouncements couched in statements that are at best unfounded populism or repetition of the obvious will not benefit the WID or gender agenda (I am treating WID and Gender issues slightly differently for reasons that are germane but too detailed to be treated here). Establishing the unique contribution of women, claiming preferential treatment for the females or proclaiming slogans for the equality of sexes will all have to be analytically and factually presented. Otherwise, WID and gender discussions will degenerate into rhetorical assertions only.

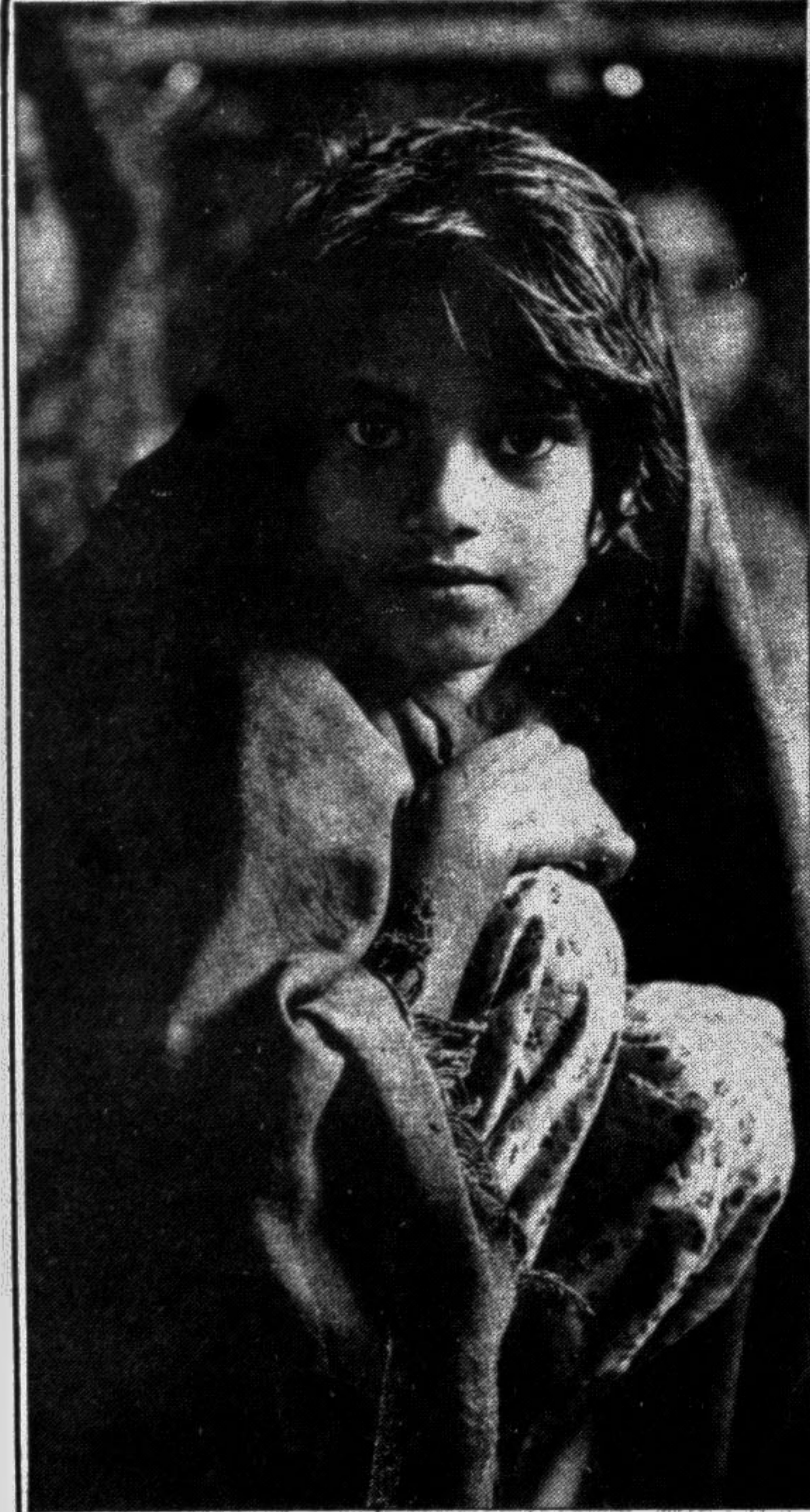
Gender disparity and discrimination is clearly existing in all societies. Attempts should be made by all to rid such an unacceptable practice. However, in doing so, care should be taken so that advancing the cause of women does not become an overkill. Claims that are not based on reason and analysis and pronouncements that are rhetorical in nature will not help the WID cause. Reverse discrimination, which may be the case when illogical demands are made for pushing the WID agenda should be equally disregarded. Otherwise the traditional "Male bias" will be replaced with "Female bias", which will also be unacceptable to any sane person.

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Hunger and poverty are more women issues. Women experience hunger and poverty in much more intense ways than that experienced by men. Women have to stay at 'home' and manage the family with virtually nothing to manage with. When there is nothing to eat, husbands prefer to stay away from home to avoid facing the immediate crisis. Mother cannot avoid facing it. She frantically looks for ways to feed the children. It is she who has to invent the last survival manoeuvre.

Mohammed Yunus of Grameen Bank



We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait, the child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer "Tomorrow." His name is "Today."

Gabriela Mistral

What Bangladeshi Women are Doing Abroad

by Shaheen Anam

BANGLADESHI women are living abroad for a variety of reasons. Some have accompanied their husbands on assignments, some have gone as professionals on their own right and many have migrated with their entire families.

Just as women at home are breaking away from traditions that define her role only as a homemaker and venturing out into the world outside, so are women abroad trying to etch out a place and name for themselves. It is not at all easy because they lack many of the support systems women have at home. In spite of many constraints and obstacles, such as family, housework, absence of domestic help, legal working papers, etc. there are many women who are making a mark in the society they live in. It is to highlight the efforts of these women that the first of many such articles is addressed to.

Yasmin Ali in Rome, Entering the World of Colour, Canvas and Oil.

"I always loved using my hands, for drawing, sketching, sewing, it was more like a hobby than anything else," Yasmin flashed her beautiful smile, not really believing that she was being interviewed as an artist. Sitting in her apart-

ment with her paintings on the wall, Yasmin looked more like a fashion model than the emerging artist that she was fast becoming.

Yasmin had come to Rome 7 years ago with her husband who had taken up an assignment with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. After living 7 years in New York where most of her time was spent in taking care of a sick child, Yasmin wanted to do something creative and beautiful when she came to Rome. So far her experience with brush and paint were restricted to making funny drawings for her children or making cards on special occasions. It was her husband's encouragement that sent her one day rather timidly to an art teacher at the FAO building. He opened up a whole world of techniques and methods that Yasmin had never known about. "Before what I did was make a drawing and than fill it up. Now, through my brush, amount of paint and stroke I bring out the shape and form. I used to make details of a leaf now I build layer after layer and the leaf emerges."

"I am very much a beginner,



Yasmin Ali with her world of colour, canvas and oil.

his students and works accordingly. What kind of paintings does she like doing most I had asked her. All kind of things, specially gardens and landscapes. She is not too fond of portraits. Well, there is no dearth of gardens in Rome

where people love flowers. She finds her surroundings very inspiring surr even a broken shutter of a house has a pot of flower on the window sill. "There are wild poppies growing by roadsides or in the fields which someone always takes care of, even an old and broken down house has a little garden."

It is also the personality of the people around her that effects her work. The colourful, outgoing spirit of the mediterranean is reflected in Yasmin's paintings which are bold and bright, very much like her personality which reminds one of sunshine on a dreary morning. But Yasmin is not only an artist who paints.

She is an artist by nature and temperament. A housewife with a passion, she is the doting mother of two beautiful children who she takes care of with a zeal and devotion that can only be called spiritual. She cuts and makes clothes for her children and for herself the quality of which would put a professional tailor to shame. Her house bears the stamp of her artistic sense and is decorated with the same touch of

colour reminding one of eternal spring.

After two successful exhibitions at the FAO Yasmin is feeling a little confident about her work. Modest as she is, she could not believe that people were actually buying her paintings and were ordering for more. What about the future, I had asked her. "I would like to paint better, perhaps when the children are older I will have more time." She loves painting with oils but it has its disadvantages. It is expensive and is very time consuming.

She would like to go away on retreats with other artists and do nothing but paint all day. She would like to have a little studio where no body would interfere or touch her work.

Her duties and responsibilities as a mother of young children restricts her from many of the artistic activities that she would like to indulge in. But Yasmin is not impatient. She is not an artist who has to perform or who has to sell a certain number of paintings. For her, art is a part of her everyday world and that is what her work reflects.

We would like to wish her every success in turning everything she touches into something beautiful.

Marriage : An Uncertain Unity?

by Soheli Afroza Azad

IN Bangladesh marriage is universal for both sexes. Though a man can delay his marriage if not able to resist it regardless of his wish but for girl, especially for a rural girl, marriage is not a matter of wish or desire, it is rule, a tradition, a duty to obey.

In Bangladesh girls are married at an early age because usually a girl of 11 or 12 in the village use to performing all the house works i.e. cooking, cleaning, washing the utensils, and clothes, taking care of the cattle and poultry etc. So when she reaches at the age of twelve or thirteen she is capable enough to look after a family.

The parents also feel scared to keep a girl unmarried when she reaches her puberty. The vulnerability of the girl demand protection from the hostile world and only marriage can ensure such protection. An unmarried girl over 13 is often the cause of disgrace or embarrassment to the family.

The invisibility of a women's work also prevailed marriage

of a young girl. The female child is not considered as an asset for the parents as a male child because she is not earning or not involving with direct production or income earning. She is considered as burden of the family. As soon as the parents found an eligible person and can agree on the amount of dowry they at once settle the marriage. Most of the rural girls give their consent in marriage without seeing the groom.

Marriage does not exhilarate the girls status in a true sense. As a obeying agent her position only moves from her parental home to her husband's home. Her inferior status only prolonged after marriage. From the very beginning of the marriage, the age difference between her and her husband put her in a subordinate position. From a micro data of 1976, collected by the Demographic Surveillance

System (DSS) it appears that with the age of the groom at first marriage as well as at remarriage, the age difference between the sexes increases rapidly. The grooms in their forties were married wives 20 years younger than themselves. The majority of grooms from the study were late twenties and most of them marry wives 10 years their junior.

The parents usually don't hesitate to arrange their daughter's marriage with a elderly person if the bridegroom or his family do not demand dowry. The amount of dowry depends upon many factors, such as, if the bride's physical beauty or her complexion is not fair, then the amount of dowry goes higher. Though the customs of bride price is also prevail in Bangladesh under Muslim family laws, the wife never demand the money in their conjugal life.



Preparing for an unpredictable life